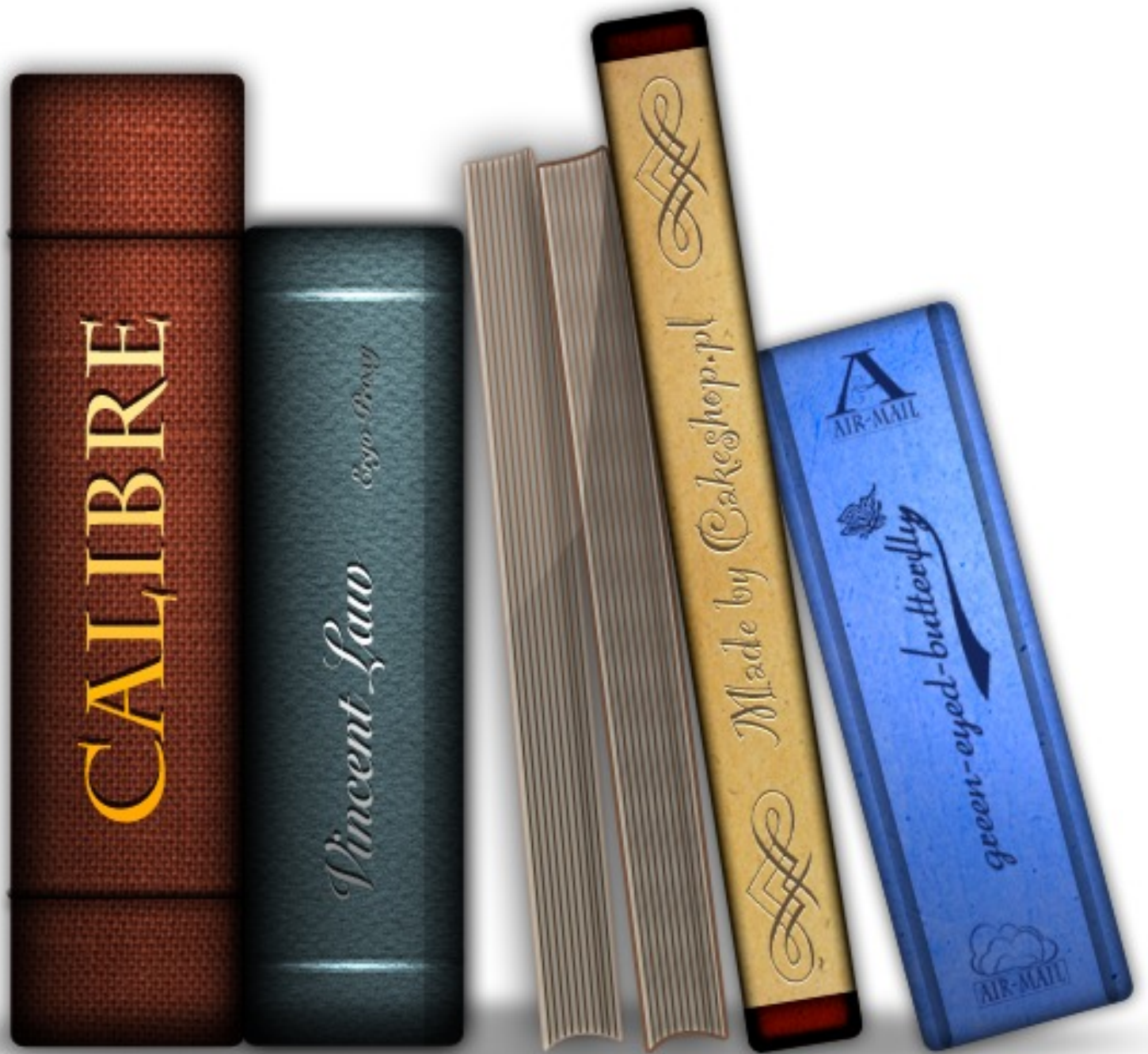


The God Catcher

Erin M. Evans



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FORGOTTEN REALMS

Ed Greenwood Presents Waterdeep series – 05

Publisher: Wizards of the Coast

eISBN: 978-0-7869-5486-5

Publish date: Feb 2010

Released: 2010-10-12, version 1.0, Dreamcity

About the Author

Erin M. Evans got a degree in Anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis—and promptly stuck it in a box. Nowadays she uses that knowledge of bones, mythology, and social constructions to flesh out fantasy worlds. She lives in Washington State.

DEDICATION

For Kevin, A true match, a true equal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe many thanks to Susan Morris who first showed me the ropes and whose combined expertise and enthusiasm kept me on the rails.

Thanks to my husband, Kevin, who was the best cheerleader I could have asked for and helped me make sure I got everything done; to my parents, who saw this coming a long time ago; to my sisters who gave me the inspiration—I hope you both like it.

And a special thank you to Ed Greenwood, who invited me in and who taught me to say I'm a writer.

INTRODUCTION

Ladies and gentlesirs, welcome to *The God Catcher*. You heard me a-right: the God Catcher.

No, it's not a bigger, better mousetrap.

Nor is it some gigantic, age-old weapon or mightier-than-all-other spell.

It's ... an apartment building.

Catchy name, huh? Cool idea, too, and the way in which one of the famous Walking Statues of Waterdeep—that haven't taken a single step in years—has been used is so ... so *Waterdeep*.

First-time Realms author Erin Evans "gets" my city; she *understands* colorful, crowded, reeking, bustling Waterdeep, from glittering highlights to its stench and warts.

Yes, we get to see more nobles—and yes, the sewers, too.

This is the fifth in a series of stand-alone novels set in the busy, cosmopolitan, increasingly corrupt city of Waterdeep, the famous mercantile port on the Sword Coast of Faerun in the FORGOTTEN REALMS® fantasy setting.

Like its predecessors (no, you don't have to read them all, or any of them, in any order, to enjoy this book), *The God Catcher* takes us on a wild adventure through Waterdeep.

And once again we're reminded that the best adventures are enjoyed alongside friends. In this case, our friend is Tennora, a young woman trying to make a life for herself in

Waterdeep, stepping out of the clutches of her aunt and uncle to become her own person in a decidedly seedier part of the City of Splendors.

Tennora has a rather mysterious past, no living parents on the scene, and hopes to master magic by studying at the House of Wonders. Her creator draws us right in close to see and feel what it's like to try to make ends meet in Waterdeep when coins are few, you're young and have more determination and energy than anything else, and lots of things go wrong—which is what things in Waterdeep have an all too well-established and enthusiastic habit of doing.

There's something juicy and intensely satisfying about "look behind the scenes" novels, wherein not just dark villainy and conspiracy is uncovered, but glimpses of the daily lives of citizens high and low.

Not to mention dragons.

And bounty hunters who doggedly pursue a living target halfway across Faerun ...

Oops; mentioned them after all, didn't I? Sorry. Well, now, I'll just take another alley before I skulk another step along this one, so I won't ruin the great story ahead of you.

The God Catcher brings you Waterdeep from a fresh angle, showing and explaining all sorts of things about the city without ever stopping for a moment to do so. (Yes, things even I didn't know, so I *know* they'll be new to you.)

Tennora grows before our eyes, her life gets a whole lot more interesting than I suspect she ever wanted it to be—and in a hurry—and we get treated to a dandy adventure that starts innocently enough, eases us through speculation and slowly gathering menace, then picks up speed fast.

Near the end of this book, matters are hurtling along, an increasingly impressive tally of crimes is being committed before your eyes by lots of people (some of whom you know, and others who come as surprises—boy, I'd hate to be a member of the City Watch in this town!), and ... well, I eventually had to surface just to breathe, looked at the slender handful of pages remaining, and wondered aloud just how Erin was going to bring it all home in the rapidly dwindling space she had left.

She managed it, and I *love* the result.

You will, too, and I have only one regret: she introduced us to so many interesting characters of Waterdeep that I want to read a row of more books about each one of them!

Ed Greenwood February 2010

PROLOGUE

Over the surface of the dragon's scrying pool, the shiver of waves reflected a band of men and women in borrowed armor, the last handful of whom were trying to fight off an unusually well-equipped group of orcs. At least a score of the humans lay on the ground, their blood seeping into the early frost.

Andareunarthex lashed his tail. He waved a claw over the water and the image vanished. A waste, he thought, an utter waste.

A ringing interrupted his thoughts, followed by the whistling roar of another dragon's voice.

Your army has fallen, said Magaolonereth, the clutchmate of Andareunarthex's sire. Dareun growled a warning trill.

I do not know what you mean, he sent back.

Don't pretend to be stupid, Magaoloriereth said. *The claw test. Those humans were yours. Everyone suspects.*

Dareun drummed his claws on the stone floor of his cave. It was a magnificent cave—even if it weren't decorated by the goodly amount of treasure he'd amassed at his young age it would be a cave to marvel at. The walls were scalloped and sparkling with mosaics of crystals, their exposed edges polished with time. The ceiling was high and dramatic, a cathedral of earth spangled with stalactites. A wyrm twice Dareun's age would be lucky to have the cavern

for a lair, he thought. Not that Magaolonereth and the others would admit it.

I know the move was yours, Magaolonereth went on, and Dareun could picture the old green dragon sneering down at his own scrying glass, watching the orcs tear the last of the humans apart.

No one else would be so forward.

You see forwardness, I see an aggressive move.

You forget yourself and play another game. Xorvintaal is not for the rash.

I was not rash! Dareun snapped. The silence that followed was full of his father's clutchmate's smugness.

I was careful, he amended in calmer tones. *The humans thought they were helping a village at the base of the mountains, who in turn thought they were avoiding the fate some travelers convinced them would fall upon them in a few tendays. I was ready for Karshinevin's orcs.*

Magaolonereth snorted. *Not near ready enough. Everyone knew you had sent your pieces out in rags to play as travelers. Do you wonder that no one staked any treasure on your winning? Everyone knew your move and knew you would fail.*

But only Dareun had known Karshinevin had maneuvered through her minions to put a band of orcs into play. No one would mention that. They would only say what a clever move Karshinevin had made. Dareun would be forced to agree. He had grudgingly staked a casket of gold on the bronze dragon's success—but thrice that on his own. The orcs were a clever move, but he'd been hoping

Karshinevin would pull back when she realized the orcs were going to attack humans. Knowing Karshinevin, she'd managed to find an extraordinary tribe of orcs who had a good reason to raid the village.

It is not about winning every encounter, Dareun said.

Magaolonereth fell silent for a moment, and Dareun suspected he'd caught the old green off-guard. He lashed his tail against the ledge of the scrying pool. They all assumed he was too young to be patient, too young to play the game. But with every loss, he was learning, gaining on their graying hides, finding holes in the restrictive rules of *xorvintaal*.

He turned his attention briefly to the other voice that whispered in his mind—a dark, distant voice. Cold and alien and full of magic, the voice he'd lured to him by painstaking ritual and tricked into imbuing him with the magic of a dying star.

Learning to play *xorvintaal* had stripped away what magic he'd had—what magic all his fellow players, the *taaldarax*, had. It was one of the oldest rules of *xorvintaal*—to gain, first you must lose.

But only Dareun wielded the star's powers. He had an edge.

It's also not about throwing away the claw test. You should be cautious, Magaolonereth said. *You're angering other taaldarax. You'll draw their eyes to you. I say this not as a rival, but as your sire's clutchmate. You must pay attention.*

Everything you say is as a rival, Dareun thought. There were good reasons Dareun had not accepted the tutelage of

Magaolonereth. But after a calculated and contemplative pause, he said, *Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I will step back and observe. Plan my next move more carefully.*

With luck Magaolonereth would spread that information. The old ones would be distracted, sending their *lovacs* and their minions after his minor hoards and holdings—or more likely still, pointing unsuspecting, greedy fools to them. All in the hopes of crippling Andareunarthex and forcing him to yield.

He would keep them busy—his own *lovacs* had been warned of possible attacks.

Which left plenty of time for Andareunarthex to make a move no other player would expect. He stirred the water of the scrying pool with a claw.

Most prudent, Magaolonereth said. *We'll await your return to the game.*

When the ripples settled, the image of a city by the sea surrounded by a high wall and crowned by the peaks of many towers appeared. He thrashed his tail again.

I promise you won't be waiting long, Dareun said, and then bid his uncle farewell. It was time to move pieces into Waterdeep.

ONE

Heavens to Hells," Lady Aowena Hedare cried. She leaned out of the window that overlooked the street of the God Catcher. "What sort of neighborhood is this?"

"A good one," Tennora assured her aunt, though it was hardly a neighborhood—more the accidental square created where Sul Street met a funny little jog off Market Street that to Tennora's knowledge had no agreed-upon name. A hearth-house, a dry goods store, and a few far-shippers were tucked into the surrounding buildings, but the tenement the locals called the God Catcher was the neighborhood.

"Doesn't look that way to me," Tennora's uncle Eckhart said, peering over his wife's rounded shoulder. He snorted through his thick moustaches. "Or sound like it."

"I promise," Tennora said, "this isn't normal. It's a very *nice* neighborhood."

But of course, the one day she'd managed to set aside for her aunt and uncle, to prove to them once and for all that she wasn't living in the midst of criminals and coin lasses, everything had to fall apart. Tennora had planned everything carefully—she always planned carefully. She'd spent the whole morning trying to make certain the visit would be as uneventful as possible. Set the table ahead of time and arranged the chips to all face her own seat. Beaten out the rug beneath the table. Spent an hour assembling little morsels of bread and salty ham so that her aunt wouldn't notice she was out of butter. Cooked and cleaned and pressed so that everything would go well.

It wasn't fair, Tennora thought, to hold her accountable for the madwoman standing in the street and screaming up at her apartment.

"What is she saying?" Aunt Aowena asked. "Plaque Clock? Brack Rock?"

"I believe it's 'Blacklock,'" Tennora said, stifling a sigh. "Aundra Blacklock. The landlady." She pointed up at the arm of the God Catcher, stretched out above them.

Years before, Tennora's apartment had been part of a glorious statue controlled by the Lords of Waterdeep. The Walking Statues were famed for protecting the City of Splendors against invaders. Then the Spellplague erupted and drove the statues mad. The God Catcher had been headed to crush the market, the very heart of its city, when a wizard—the Blackstaff, they said—turned the ground beneath it into mud. Its leg sank, and the statue collapsed, its arm reaching up toward the heavens, and froze. The leg remained, a passage into the sewers below. The body curled over its other knee had been built over with new construction, and a set of stairs wound its way up the outstretched arm. But the calm stone face regarding the sphere, the muscles of its shoulder, and the long column of its pale gray arm remained visible.

Twenty feet above the statue's open palm a sphere without a visible door floated—the home of Aundra Blacklock, proprietor and sorceress, and the source of the madwoman's ire.

"She could at least *enunciate*." Aunt Aowena sniffed.

"If *that* is the sort of person your landlady is acquainted with," Uncle Eckhart said, "I shudder to think of the sort of ruffians she's rented to."

"No offense, dear," Aunt Aowena added.

"I don't believe they're acquainted," Tennora said. The woman had the red-faced, uncomprehending look of pure rage that the mysterious Aundra Blacklock frequently inspired in people who didn't know better. Aundra kept to herself, unapologetically so. Tennora could count on one hand the number of times she'd spoken to the raptoran landlady—once when she'd rented the apartment in the God Catcher's shoulder, and twice when Aundra had flown down to Tennora's window to pick up the rent payments in the early evening hours. If the woman wanted Aundra's attention, she was going to be waiting.

The madwoman scooped up a piece of broken pavement from the street and hurled it at the God Catcher. It hit Tennora's neighbor's shuttered window. Aunt Aowena squealed, and Tennora fought the urge to scream.

"Why don't we just sit back—" she started to say.

"Ah!" her uncle interrupted. "There's the Watch. About time."

A carefully prepared highsunfeast lay forgotten on the table. But, Tennora thought, perhaps it was not all bad. The disturbance outside had interrupted her aunt's latest attempt to convince Tennora to return home with them to the North Ward.

"You're not *truly* happy here," Aunt Aowena had said, ignoring the cashew soup Tennora had spent most of the morning preparing. "How could you be? Shabby, shabby place. The air has to be terrible on your poor lungs."

"I'm certain the air is quite the same here as in the North Ward," Tennora said.

Aowena ignored her. "I'll tell you what—Eckhart and I are looking for a tutor for your cousins. You can move back in with us and we'll even give you spending coins, like a little salary. How does that sound?"

"It's very kind," Tennora replied, even though it wasn't kind in the least. It was an easy way for her aunt to educate Tennora's four cousins and an easier way to slip her back into the house. "I know I can always count on you, Aunt Aowena, but—"

Her aunt clapped gleefully. "You can move into the Griffon Room! And we'll introduce you to all the *best* young men—don't want to be a tutor forever, do we now?"

Tennora's thoughts unavoidably slid to the last young man she had been introduced to. Ballinton Marchenor, a third son of that family, an officer of the guard who spent the better part of the last evenfeast she'd attended regaling her with the geography of the sewers he patrolled. He had been very eager and sweet, called her Lady Hedare as he was supposed to, and took her hand with an earnestness that suggested he didn't do that often.

Tennora had found it too cruel to tell him that while she was sure he had many nice qualities, he was an utter bore and still smelled of the sewers.

She concentrated very hard on not making a face. "That is kind of you as well. But I'm afraid my studies—"

"Tut! There's no point to a lovely young girl with your means wasting her time with wizardry. I always told your mother—"

That was when the madwoman started screaming, and although it didn't seem like a charitable thought, Tennora

was glad the madwoman had saved her the unbearable chore of explaining to Aunt Aowena that she didn't *want* to live in the North Ward and teach arithmetic to her snotty cousins while empty-headed young men squired her around ballrooms. That she wanted to continue studying wizardry in her apprenticeship at the House of Wonder.

It also saved her the embarrassment of admitting she wasn't studying wizardry anymore, that her apprenticeship had been ended.

"They're not going to—" Aowena broke off with a squeal. "Oh Eckhart, they've got their swords out!"

"There, there, my dear. They won't do anything upsetting."

Judging by the way Aowena squealed again and covered her eyes, Tennora suspected the Watch couldn't cross the square without being "upsetting" to her aunt.

Add it to the list of things that upset her, Tennora thought, along with me moving away, learning something useful, having friends I wasn't introduced to at a party at the Roaringhorns', and wearing my hair like this. Ever since Tennora's parents had died of a featherlung epidemic when she was fifteen, she had been struggling to find a way to please her aunt and uncle without making herself miserable. The idea of telling Aunt Aowena about losing her place at the House of Wonder, a school for wizards, made Tennora wish she could trade places with the madwoman.

She leaned over Aowena's shoulder to look out the window. It was a grayish, drizzly day, and the silvery armor of the Watch seemed faded and insubstantial in the gloom. The captain of the patrol was inching toward the woman. She slung another pebble up at the God Catcher.

"All right, mistress," the captain called. "Put your hands on top of your head and come along quietly. No need to disturb the God Catcher further."

The woman turned to him with a contemptuous grace and looked the captain over as if sizing him up. She was too far away and spoke too softly for Tennora to hear what she said next, but the captain stepped back as if jolted and shouted an order to surround and subdue the madwoman.

"Oh!" Aowena cried, her eyes riveted on the advancing guards. "It's just too terrible to watch!"

The Watchmen slipped through the crowd, ordering the bystanders to step back and clear a path. The woman seemed to coil, preparing for the attack, relishing it—though Tennora suspected that was only her imagination. Who would relish such a thing?

The patrolman behind the woman sprang forward and twisted her arm behind her back. The woman slipped from his grasp, fluid as an eel. A second patrolman with ginger hair peeking out from his helmet snatched her around the waist and tried to lift her off her feet—and got a heel to each knee for his trouble. He dropped her but managed to hold tight to her waist.

"She ought to be ashamed of herself!" Uncle Eckhart said. "Making such a scene! Didn't her mother ever teach her to respect her betters?"

It would be more useful, Tennora thought as the madwoman twisted against her captor, if her mother had taught her to fight off an attacker. The guard holding the madwoman had positioned himself perfectly for a sharp punch to the kidney—

She caught herself in the midst of the thought.

I would never do that, she reminded herself. Just because she'd made a point of learning to protect herself when she'd moved deeper into the city and away from her family's guardsmen didn't mean she fantasized about using those skills.

Except, a little part of her said, you just did.

The first guard and one of his comrades—a woman with a brown braid down her back—grabbed the madwoman by the wrists. The captain shouted for her to stop resisting and come along. The madwoman's laughter rang through the courtyard.

She broke the woman's grip and sprang backward. She cast a hand high over her head.

And then she vanished.

The Watchmen all fell back, staring at the empty space. Something powerful had just happened, to be sure. Tennora leaned out the window, scanning the crowd for any sign of the woman—there were spells that let a body move through the air with a thought, but not too far. The Watch seemed to be thinking the same thing. They spread through the crowd, searching the bystanders. She might have been invisible. A disturbance in the air, a phantom brush against an arm, the sound of fabric sliding against itself—there were clues, to be sure, but no one seemed to notice anything amiss.

Only that the woman was gone—no trace, no trail, no aftereffects.

A shiver ran up Tennora's spine. Something powerful indeed. "Well," Aowena said. "I do hope she's learned her

lesson. Now, what were you saying about your studies, dear?"

An hour later, after the street had calmed down and the Timehands chimed tharsun, Aowena and Eckhart finally went home to the North Ward, thanking Tennora for the visit and reminding her that the position of tutor was still available.

"But don't count on it forever, dove," Aowena said, handing the coachman her handbag. "I do need to fill it soon."

"Never mind her," Eckhart said once Aowena had stepped into the coach. "You're always welcome to come home, tutor or not."

"Oh!" Aowena cried, sticking her head out of the window. "I nearly forgot! We have a trunk for you. I told them to send it this morning, but you *know* how the servants can be."

"What trunk?"

"Oh, they found it tidying up the Phoenix Room—that was your mother's room, remember, dear?" Aowena's tones had not, to the casual observer, changed, but to Tennora's practiced ear the enmity Aowena had felt for her late sister-in-law rang clear. "It was pushed back under the bed, behind *all* her boxes of clothes."

"What trunk?" Tennora asked again.

"Just some old things of your mother's," Aowena said. "I thought you might like to have them. It should come by this evening."

Tennora tried not to look too surprised. Those things of her parents' that hadn't been destroyed to ward off the disease were kept at the Hedare family manor—where they belonged, according to her aunt and uncle. She had some few relics of their lives: a portrait of her mother, her father's silk handkerchief, the quilt that had lain on their marriage bed. The trunk was likely full of odds and ends, bits of junk that her mother had wanted out of sight and out of mind. Probably trinkets of her life before she'd married into the noble family.

Still, it had been hers.

Tennora agreed to watch for the errand boy and no, she wouldn't let anyone else into her home. She kissed her aunt and uncle on the cheeks, went back to her apartment, locked the door behind her, and sat down in front of the window to watch the rain that had started pouring down in earnest. A fitting complement, she thought, to the past two days. She tugged at a loose thread at the hem of her skirt.

All her worries came back to her in a rush: There would be no more lessons. There would be no more chances. She closed her eyes, the afternoon that had ruined her life running through her mind.

She had been in the library of Master Rhinzen Halnian's tower, researching for a test on enchanted objects. Carefully balancing on a wobbly step stool, she scanned the shelves for a book she'd found mentioned in a footnote—*Ritual Development and Magical Restraint*. Not a book she *needed*, to be fair, but the footnote—itself in a book she had not strictly needed to be studying—implied intriguing information about how imbuing magic in items often created drawbacks if the ritual was more powerful than the caster intended. Master Halnian's test wouldn't ask anything about

magic item creation, she was sure, but Tennora's curiosity begged to be sated.

Behind her someone cleared his throat. Startled, Tennora looked down at a handsome young man wearing blue robes similar to her own.

Cassian Laforman was a fellow apprentice to Rhinzen Halnian. If there was a better-looking young man anywhere in Faerun, Tennora hoped they kept him locked away somewhere to avoid riots. He had soft brown hair and hazel eyes so bright and warm, Tennora felt as if she were melting when he looked at her.

She had not—of course—told Cassian any of that.

"Coins bright, Cassian. You scared me. Can I help you?"

At that moment the stool wobbled. The young man reached out to steady her, grabbing her hands. Warmth flooded Tennora.

"All right there?" Cassian asked, giving her a charming smile.

"Yes!" Tennora said. "I mean, thank you. This old stool is ... They should replace it."

Cassian gave her a curious look, and Tennora blushed as he helped her down.

"I was just looking for a book," she said, mentally kicking herself. What else would she have been doing up there? Bird-watching?

"Do you really need another?" Cassian asked, casting an eye at the table Tennora had been using for her research.

Books lay open on still more open books, hanging over every edge. "You have nearly the whole library there."

Tennora smiled nervously. "Well, there are a lot of references and ... I just like books?"

He smiled back. "You certainly do. Master Halnian sent me. He wants to have a word with you. He's in his study." Cassian looked at the mountain of books. "He sounded urgent."

"I'll just ... clean them up later," Tennora said. "Thank you. For telling me." Before he could answer, Tennora rushed out of the library.

Bloody Sune's spit, she thought, pressing a cool hand against her face. Why did he make her act like she had all the social graces of a hobgoblin? Tennora knew she was pretty enough, knew she had plenty of interesting things to say—yet when faced with Cassian ... she might as well *be* a hobgoblin.

In the hallway, she passed another student, an elf girl called Shava carrying a tray of used glasses and half-finished sweetmeats away from Master Halnian's study. Tennora stopped her.

"Is he upset?" she asked.

"Not a bit," Shava said. "He seems to be in a better mood than usual." A weight came off Tennora's shoulders.

Remembering that feeling of relief, Tennora cringed.

The door to Master Halnian's study was open. Her master stood in front of a row of windows that faced the sea and was high enough in the tower to spy the gray edge of the water

and catch the smell of the salt breeze if the windows were open. Shelves of books and strange artifacts lined two walls. Behind Master Halnian's divan he kept an array of particularly precious items behind glass—a sword with an amethyst in the hilt carved like a sleeping face, a crown made of silver bones, a collar set with a moonstone the size of Tennora's fist that Master Halnian had said was a piece of the Songdragon's armor from the Wailing Years. They all scintillated with waiting magic.

On the wall farthest from the windows, the symbol of the dead goddess still traced the stones—a ring of seven stars around a plume of red. As she often did, Tennora took a moment to study it, reverence in her memorization of the fading paint and chipped stones.

"Master Halnian?" Tennora said. "You wanted to see me?"

The eladrin wizard turned abruptly. "Tennora. Please sit," he said with a smile. She slid into the chair opposite him.

"Tennora," he said, taking a seat behind his desk. He said her name like a sigh. Tennora's heart squeezed—she was in trouble. She ran through the last tenday—nothing stood out. But the look of concern on Master Halnian's face was unavoidable.

"Tennora, there's no easy way to say this. I'm afraid I'm going to have to release you from your term of study," he said.

The words struck her like a slap to the face. "I-I'm sorry?"

"I don't believe this is the proper ... path for you. I know you are very passionate about learning the Art," he said. "But I simply cannot condone keeping you here. You see, when Lord and Lady Hedare first brought you to me, I had

thought ... well, my dear, you have a certain grace in your physical movement. It does not translate to your casting."

"What do you mean?" "I mean that the practice of the Art should be like a dance, an opera, a synergy of motion and sound and magic. What we have left is fragile and fickle. It deserves care and focus. You, my dear—how shall I put it? You *yank* on the threads of the Weave as if they were leashes and the spells errant hounds."

"But ..." Tennora said. "But isn't there anything I can do? I mean, I'm studying very hard—"

"Yes, yes," Rhinzen said. "You're a very intelligent girl. Very quick. But being clever is only a *part* of mastering the Weave."

"Isn't that what you're supposed to be teaching me?" Tennora asked. "I can sense it—I can—it's just that sometimes the spells don't quite work right. That happens to everyone."

"You more than most," Rhinzen said. "I am glad to see your eyebrows have grown back, by the by."

Tennora blushed. "It wasn't so bad as all that."

Rhinzen stood and paced behind her, studied his artifacts. "The matter is simple, my dear. Some of us are gifted with an understanding of the Weave. And some of us are not. That is the way things are, and neither you nor I can change that any more than we can make ourselves dwarves!"

"But I ... I know I can. I just need—"

"Waterdeep needs quality wizards. What would we have done if Ahghairon's spells didn't work quite right? Where would we be if the Songdragon's armor had been enchanted by mere amateurs?"

Exactly where we are now, a small voice in the back of Tennora's mind said. The Spellplague came, with or without you.

Out loud, she said, "Master Halnian, I promise you I do not take this lightly. Give me another chance. Please. I have wanted to be a wizard all my life."

"Tennora, please." The eladrin set a hand on hers. "Make certain you tidy the library before you leave."

And that had been that. She was unsuited to the Art. She had wasted whole years trying. It didn't matter how much she wanted or tried or studied.

Master Halnian wouldn't take her back. Everything she'd loved, everything she'd studied for so long, had been pointless.

She thought of her fellow students—especially handsome Cassian. He'd go on to great things, probably marry some elf girl with no hips, Tennora thought bitterly. One who could cast a fire spell without burning anyone's eyebrows off.

She watched the rain fall and the clouds drift by, becoming darker and stormier with each passing sigh. It was as if her life had stopped.

Her stomach gurgled as if to remind Tennora that her life had not stopped and that she still had to figure out what she was going to do next. A meal, a pint, and some sympathy

seemed like an excellent plan to start with, and Tennora rose from her seat to look out the window.

The view encompassed the square and its jumble of ancient and rebuilt architecture. People tended to forget anything was even there, sandwiched as it was between busier streets. Tennora adored it. The history of Waterdeep peeked out of every corner.

Where other areas of the city had been rebuilt with care, the street of the God Catcher made do with what it could, picking up bits and baubles from the ruins. A section of cobbles made from a fallen tower, the window arch still intact. A wall that jutted proudly between two buildings, surpassing and supporting them both. An ornate street lamp, just in front of the hearth-house, that hadn't been lit in a century.

Tennora squinted into the rain.

Under the street lamp, the madwoman waited.

Something about her made Tennora want to close the shutters and crawl back into bed. If Tennora went out, the madwoman would seize her, she felt sure. She might scream a banshee's scream, and then rip her—

Tennora shook her head. What in the Nine Hells was getting into her? She looked at the woman standing in the rain. Just a woman—she didn't even seem to carry a weapon. Though whatever she'd done earlier had clearly been some sort of spell. ...

The hearth-house—and a hope for capping off the dreary day with a better evening—waited beyond the dark street lamp and its mad sentinel. If Tennora moved quickly and kept her distance, she could probably avoid speaking to the

woman at all. She was quick. She knew how to avoid people, how to slip by with a demure smile and be on her way. It wouldn't be difficult at all. She buckled her stormcloak and snuffed out the candles—and with them the concern lingering in the back of her mind.

Her staff rested in the corner by the door. Tennora let her fingers trace the hard lines of the wood grain.

She left it and slammed the door shut behind her.

Every step of the four flights it took to reach street level was punctuated by the sounds of children shouting, women and men laughing and arguing, the smells of a dozen suppers—and here and there conversations between neighbors about the madwoman screaming in the street.

Once she was out the door, Tennora crossed the square quickly, trying to keep her head down so the woman wouldn't make eye contact with her.

Her curiosity gnawed at her. At the gutter she stopped and risked a glance.

The woman was still staring at the sphere that hovered over the statue's outstretched hand. She was watching for Aundra Blacklock.

The woman was soaked to the skin, her dark hair plastered against her back and shoulders like a shroud. Up close, Tennora could see her aquiline nose, her skin the color of burnt sugar, and the sharp outlines of sinewy muscles wrapping up the woman's arms. The woman's hands were clenched at her sides. She wore nothing but a linen sheath with a belt and a pouch on a leather string around her neck. Just looking at her made Tennora want to shiver.

Tennora clearly made no impression on the woman. Nor, it seemed, did the rain, the children watching from the windows of the God Catcher, or anything else.

Tennora felt a twinge of pity. After all, trying to deal with Aundra Blacklock could make anyone a little mad.

And, too much like Tennora, the woman seemed to be at the end of her rope.

"Excuse me," Tennora said, before her fear could stop her. "Do you need some help?"

The woman kept staring at the God Catcher.

"Excuse me?" Tennora tried again. "Coins bright? Are you a friend of Mistress Blacklock's?"

Silence.

"Would you like to come in while you wait for her? To the hearth-house here?" Tennora paused. "I'd rather not dine alone."

"Dokaal," the woman said, "what makes you think I need or even wish for your assistance?" The woman's voice was coldly musical and it made the hair on Tennora's arms stand on end. Her mouth felt dry, and she swallowed.

"Perhaps," Tennora said, hesitantly, "because you are standing in the rain with no stormcloak."

The woman looked down at her arms and the state of her tattered dress—which was rapidly becoming translucent—as if she hadn't noticed the fact.

"I will survive it," she said.

"The Watch will be back."

"And I will remind them why they fled the last time."

"They didn't exactly flee."

The woman's gaze was suddenly on Tennora, her eyes bright blue against the cold gray of the rain. "What did you say?"

"They didn't exactly flee," Tennora said. "They just gave up."

"It is the same." The woman snorted. She looked back up at the God Catcher.

Tennora pulled her hood down. If the woman wanted to stand in the rain and skulk like a lunatic until the Watch came back and dragged her off, that wasn't Tennora's concern. She'd tried her best. If the woman died of damp lungs, she couldn't fault herself.

"Well, good evening then."

As she turned, an iron grip closed around her forearm and yanked her back. The woman was looking down at her again, speculative now. She wore a strange biting perfume that Tennora hadn't noticed before.

"You came from the statue."

"Yes."

"Do you know Blacklock?"

Tennora frowned. "Aundra?" She tried to pull free and failed. "She owns the God Catcher."

"Do you *know* her?"

"I don't think anyone *knows* Aundra, whatever you mean. Can I be on my way?"

The woman let go, and Tennora stumbled backward. "You know Aundra Blacklock," the woman said, "so I would like to have that help you offered. I need information."

"I only offered a meal and company. I don't know what you want from Aundra—"

"I need ... help." The woman drew herself up—she was very tall—and held her chin a little higher. "I have a problem to discuss with her."

Tennora hesitated—she wasn't about to give some mad-woman a map to Aundra. But what was to stop the woman from following Tennora into the hearth-house and harassing her there? Besides, there wasn't much information she could give about Aundra Blacklock. Nothing the woman didn't already seem to know.

Call it, she thought as she entered the hearth-house, my good deed for the day, and hope the gods are paying attention.

The hearth-house was warm and anything but gray and wet. If Aunt Aowena had set foot inside she would have pressed her handkerchief to her nose and never lowered it, but Tennora thought the place had a certain irrepressible charm. Mardin, the owner, watched from behind the bar as Tennora came in and hung her stormcloak by the fire. Aunt Aowena would also have a few things to say about Tennora carrying on a friendship with the owner of a hearth-house, but Mardin Eftnacost had been a friend of her mother's—

from before she had married Tennora's pleasant and respectable father and settled down.

Mardin had visited a few times when Liferia was still alive, always bringing little Tennora a gift and a story. And when she'd moved to the God Catcher, he made a point of watching out for her. He was a better uncle, she was sorry to admit, than Uncle Eckhart—a friendly ear to bend and a shoulder to cry on, and a free meal to offer if her rent was due. He'd been the one to teach Tennora how to handle herself if some tough tried to roll her—including the trick with the kidneys. He'd been in far worse scrapes and far more interesting adventures than anything Tennora had weathered. There was nothing like hearing a story of escaping from a tribe of gnolls in the middle of the night, still tied up, to put embarrassing herself in front of her classmates into proper perspective.

Mardin raised an eyebrow at the woman dripping on the floor and glaring at the ceiling. Tennora shook her head as if to say, "Don't ask," and held up two fingers for ale and whatever smelled so deliciously of rosemary. She sat down at a table close to the fire. That time of day, Mardin's hearth-house wasn't crowded.

The woman sat down across from her, where she could look out the cracked window at the God Catcher. "Where is Aundra Blacklock?"

"I have no idea," Tennora said.

"When will she return?"

"I don't know that either."

A grin that was more frustration than joy curved the woman's mouth. "Well, *dokaal*, what do you know?" "I know

you're chasing a very difficult person to pin down." One of the serving girls set two mugs on the table. "And my name's Tennora. Tennora Hedare. What's yours?"

The woman's smile fluttered, as if she might laugh or maybe cry.

"Clytemorrenestrix," she said, speaking each syllable with care and precision as if it were a pearl she was laying down before Tennora.

"It's pretty," Tennora said and meant it. "Is it Tethyrian?"

"No," the woman said.

"You just ... you looked as if you might be Tethyrian," Tennora said, sensing she'd hit a nerve. "It's very unique. I feel as if I know it though. It almost sounds like a name out of a storybook. Like an ancient queen."

She laughed—a brittle, strange laugh that made Tennora shiver. "Not a queen."

Tennora frowned. "Does it ... mean something?"

"'She Will Thunder in the Sky.'"

"That would be an interesting name for a queen," Tennora said with a tentative smile. "Or perhaps some sort of folk heroine, like in the old stories ..."

Her voice failed her. She felt her mouth dry up again, and the pages of history books flew by her mind's eye. She knew where she'd heard a name like that before.

"No," she heard herself whisper. "It's not for a queen, is it? Not a heroine. It's a dragon's name."

Clytemorrenestrix slowly looked up at Tennora through dark lashes, and this time Tennora could see that her eyes glowed like caged spellplague. The look they gave her was not merely speculative but predatory. The woman's perfume smelled like nothing so much as the air in summer when the sky was full of lightning, so much so that Tennora felt as if it crackled in her lungs.

"A dragon?" the woman said. That cruel grin curled across her lips again and Tennora's blood ran cold. "Is that what I look like?"

"No," Tennora said. "A little. You just—"

"Just what?"

Tennora swallowed. "Mistress, if you told me you were a dragon ... I wouldn't doubt you."

"Well, I'm not," the woman said, sitting back from the table.

All at once, whatever strange power had gripped Tennora fell away. Clytemorrenestrix was once again an ordinary woman.

"What ... what are you then?"

She glowered up at the God Catcher again. "I don't know. But I'm not a dragon. Not anymore."

"How could that happen?" Tennora said.

"Spellplague," she spat, and then drank from her mug as if to rinse the taste of the word from her mouth.

TWO

Veron Angalen had entered Waterdeep by the South Gate, tired and hungry, irritated by the furtive, worried looks he gathered—better, he admitted, than the outright looks of disgust a half-orc walking down the street got in some places, but smuggler for their sheen of tolerance. He had been so frustrated that he'd nearly missed the dark-haired woman standing in the middle of the chaos of the gate and looking up at the towers of Waterdeep. A woman he'd been hunting for the last fourteen months.

That had been a day and a half earlier. Sitting in the corner of a hearth-house, cooling his heels and picking the last strings of meat from the bones of his dinner, Veron walked himself through what had gone wrong at the gate and what could easily go wrong when he found her again.

He pushed his plate back, and picked the saltcellar up from the table. If he was the saltcellar, then she had been as close as the knot in the wood grain of the table—in reality, perhaps the length of three carts. There had been plenty of carts to measure against—he laid several squab bones out to represent those. His knife he laid on the edge of the table—the South Gate he'd entered by.

He shifted the saltcellar. He had ducked behind a passing cart and watched her, hardly believing his eyes. The same features, the same height and build. If he called out her name, there was no doubt in his mind she would turn. He had expected she was in Waterdeep, but not that he'd find her as soon as he crossed into the city gates. City of Splendors indeed. She was distracted, staring up at the

towers—he could capture her and take her back to Cormyr, collect his payment and move on.

He slid the saltcellar around the knob of a leg bone so that it stood partially shielded by the rib-cage water wagon. Behind the knot that stood for the woman by a bare inch. It had been perhaps five feet. It would have been so simple.

But he had hesitated. The gate had been crowded with scores of hawkers, farmers, pickpockets, servants, and patrolmen. There was nothing on his plate or in his pockets that he could use to represent all the people who had been milling between him and the woman and giving him sideways glances that said they trusted a murderer over a half-orc.

In Cormyr, Veron had seen the body—the wizard on the floor with his throat cut in a jagged line. Not by a knife. A shard of glass the size of his palm with a trim of dried blood lay discarded and cracked beside the dead man. Pieces of arcane equipment had been smashed to pieces. Scorch marks marred a floor littered with the pages of thrown-open tomes.

The servants all attested that the woman had been *invited* into the wizard Ardusk Nagaenil's study and that he'd asked not to be disturbed. They had been there for the better part of an hour.

Brace, the older hunter who employed Veron, hadn't believed it. "Servants will say a lot of things when their master's dead," he'd said.

But if they had been telling the truth, they had called for the war wizards when they heard their master shouting. Which meant the chaos that had ended with another man dead had taken all of a few minutes.

If she snapped in a crowd of people, who knew how many would end up dead.

Veron was inclined to believe the servants. He'd found the wizard's notes. Ardusk had been interested in her. Spellscarred, the wizard had posited. Loss of memory. Erratic behaviors. Possibly violent.

And thinks she's a dragon of all things, Veron added, studying the knot in the wood. The woman was madder than a mouther, he knew that much.

Veron didn't know why she'd cut the wizard's throat or why the wizard hadn't managed to stop her. He didn't know why the wizard had brought the woman up into his study in the first place—all of which bothered him.

"Don't ask too many questions," Brace had told him. "You aren't a judge, and you aren't the one hiring a hunter. What you don't know doesn't matter."

What Veron did know was that she was dangerous. That if he didn't capture her, his reputation would crumble. That he was very tired of hunting the woman, who had managed for the past year to be a village ahead, a kingdom away. Easier than catching the murderer unawares would be killing her and calling it done with. But the wizard's family wanted her captured alive, and he had agreed.

He'd slipped out from behind the cart intending to trail her until they were out of the rush of the gate. But by then she was gone. He'd missed his chance.

So he had spent the better part of two days wandering the city and looking for a sign of her. Nothing. Everywhere he looked, the crowds offered up dark-haired, tawny-skinned women, none of them the killer from Cormyr.

He dropped the pigeon bones one by one back onto the plate and recognized there was nothing he could do but wait a little longer, listen a little closer.

Verori had toyed with the idea of going to the Watch shortly after he'd lost her. But no. No. It would be a waste of time. As soon as he said, "I'm looking for a woman who thinks she's a dragon," they'd be laughing. Maybe even before. He knew the wizard's family doubted him, eyeing his olive skin and under-bite. He'd had a string of lucky captures—easily attributed to Tymora's blessing instead of his skill—and when he'd heard about the wizard's murder, he'd seen a chance to increase his renown if he could just convince them he was smart enough to do it. With enough of Brace's praise and a careful scrutiny of his cool manners, the Nagaenils—and the war wizards besides—had come around and hired him. No doubt in addition to half a dozen other hunters.

But as far as Veron could tell, no one had tracked her so far or so long.

In the last year of pursuing her, Veron had learned a great deal about the woman, but important questions—Why did she kill the wizard? What might provoke her to lash out again?—still troubled him. He sipped his ale.

When he found her again, he would have to be cautious. Careful. But confident. He would need help, that was certain.

Down by the water, where the dank reek of Mistshore hung heavily on the air and the occasional body in the alley languished until it started to smell, a well-appointed carriage had been sitting in the street for the better part of a day.

The carriage was meant to draw little notice, but in this place, anything not decayed by moisture and hard life stood out like a torch in the night. Even through the pouring rain, it was clear the carriage didn't belong. It had—no doubt—drawn plenty of notice. Standing in the doorway of an establishment he'd rather not be connected to, the carriage's owner, a man in a mask, frowned.

He spent several songs staring at the conveyance, calculating the possibilities that someone was, even now, watching him.

The drug in his system—a rare and special treat imported from the shores of Returned Abeir solely by the establishment behind him—made his already sensitive eyes ache from the lamplight. He pulled the mask a little lower so the eyeholes sat low and the mask shaded his sight. The street was still.

The masked man sighed. The carriage and anyone who'd seen it couldn't be helped. Besides, while it might have stood out in Mistshore, he thought, it did not connect *him* in any way to the drug den. Provided he wasn't followed. He watched the carriage and the street for several moments, feeling the lethargy in his bones acutely. He was alone.

Blaming his mistrust on the drugs, he strode briskly to his carriage. His groom scrambled down to open the door and help him in.

With a contented sigh, he sank down into the plush seat and pulled the mask from his face, revealing the fine-boned features of an eladrin. He rubbed his solid blue eyes, thankful the magical lamps were shaded and the curtains drawn. Inside, the threatening air of the district was shut

away. The dark carriage was warm and smelled faintly of musk and vinestar blossoms.

He frowned. He owned no such scent.

"Master Halnian," a smooth voice said.

Rhinzen Halnian nearly leaped out of his seat. He pulled the shade from the lamp, squinting in the sudden light of the glowballs. There was another man sitting opposite him. His hair was oiled back, sleek as an otter's, and the faint hint of rouge stained his cheeks. Virulent yellow lace dripped from the sleeves and collar peeking out of his black stormcloak. His muted red leggings were tucked into bright green, thick-heeled boots. He smiled, revealing two copper-capped canines.

"Enjoying your haepthum?"

"Son of a barghest, Magli," Rhinzen swore. The haepthum, the drug pulsing in his veins, made his heart race and thrust vicious spells to the front of Rhinzen's mind—easy to cast, easy to make the other man pay ...

He ran a hand through his fine blond hair, as if to push those thoughts back where they belonged. "What are you doing here?"

"My patron is in the city," Ferremo Magli said, "and I am not looking forward to discussing how you've crossed me."

"Crossed you? Magli, I've done no such thing. Have you told—"

"I haven't said anything. Yet." He pulled a thin stiletto from under his jacket.

Fire, Rhinzen thought, the spell coming easily to mind, more easily than it would have without the haepthum. But the man merely began cleaning his fingernails. Rhinzen cleared his throat to cover his nerves.

"What can I do for you, then?"

"When," Ferremo said, not looking up from his nails, "were you planning on delivering the information my patron paid you for?" "Soon," Rhinzen said. "It isn't as if the spells are all the same. You can't underestimate what a delicate process it is."

"That's funny," Ferremo said. "I believe you told us you knew these particular... spells. Had set them up, in fact."

"I did."

"Seems to me if you're worth even the half you've been paid, you would be finished by now." He looked up at the eladrin. "And I could be out of your hair instead of watching you spend my coin on your filthy habit, trying to build up enough magic to impress anyone."

Rhinzen sneered. "It's a pleasure, not a crutch."

"So you say. I suppose you could also quit whenever you like." The blade flashed in the cold light. "Just like any dreamkisser."

His anger boiled spells through his thoughts. "Who are you to speak to me like that? I am Rhinzen Halnian of the Court of Summer's End, Master of Wizardry, Head of Ritual Studies." The haepthum hummed in his blood, and Rhinzen felt as if the threads of the Weave were becoming his very veins. "I have warded the noblest of Waterdeep. I have cut down mages whose simplest spells would make you weep

like a babe. I have culled the weak willed from the mighty and raised the clever above the meek. Do you think I'm *afraid* of a thug in lady's boots?"

Thunk!

Rhinzen heard the stiletto sink into the seat beside him before he felt the knife slide between the bones of his hand. The haepthum dulled the pain, but Rhinzen still cried out as what it left untouched burned up his arm. His eyes watered. He tried to pull away, but the stiletto stuck, and Ferremo didn't loosen his grip. His eyes never left Rhinzen's as he leaned in close.

"First, I do know who you are," Ferremo whispered. His breath smelled like lemon peel. "I know exactly who you are. You shouldn't doubt yourself. Plenty of people know.

"Plenty of people who would also love to know what it is you're doing down in Mistshore in the evening hours. Think those noblest families would like to know what their scions' mentor is addicted to? I'll bet my whole purse I can tell you how well that would go. Especially when we get to discussing side effects. That little burst of pique, if my understanding is correct, is like a breeze compared to the gale you're toying with."

Blood was pooling beneath Rhinzen's palm, soaking into the velvet seats. His breath shuddered in and out of his lungs. His ears were ringing, but he heard every word Ferremo said. The man wasn't lying. He wouldn't hesitate to ruin Rhinzen's life.

"Second," Ferremo continued, "you've been paid. So I want to see results. If I have to go to my patron empty handed, I'm going to make certain you bear the brunt of

what comes next. And I'm sure you can guess how painful that would be for you."

He pulled the stiletto from Rhinzen's hand. Rhinzen gasped out in relief and swaddled his bleeding hand in the hem of his robes.

"Third," Ferremo said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping the knife clean, "you should be lucky enough to have these boots. Hydra scale. Hand stitched. They're worth a small fortune." He lifted his foot to show the gold embroidery running up the green-dyed, scaly leather. "And I think they're cunning. So I'd like to hear an apology."

"Sorry," Rhinzen said, trying not to scream.

Ferremo smiled, flashing his copper teeth. "Thank you." He slid his stiletto back into its hidden sheath. "I expect to hear from you in the next few days. Or we'll have to have another conversation."

Rhinzen nodded. Bastard human thought he was so clever.

The man smiled wider and opened the door of the carriage. "A good evening to you, Master Halnian," he said as he descended into Mistshore.

That, Ferremo thought as he walked away, was terribly fun. He seldom got the chance to do the dirty work anymore. The look on that puffed-up eladrin's face when the knife went in had been worth a dozen dragons in his coin purse. He didn't look back as the carriage clattered into the night—Rhinzen would take care of himself now. Time to get out of this cesspool and back to a nice warm—

Ferremo. The voice slapped Ferremo Magli's well-coiffed head with exquisite vertigo.

"Master?" he said softly.

Have you gotten it? the voice rumbled through his thoughts, deep as a cavern—the voice of his master's true form.

"Soon. The mage is running scared. He won't fail us."

Never underestimate the cowardice of the fey, his master said. *Keep after him. The dragonward is more than I expected.*

"Of course, master." Ferremo pulled the hood of his stormcloak lower as he passed a group of sharpjaws lurking in an alley, looking rough and reckless. "And the ... next step?"

I am preoccupied. You will do it for me. Go to her home.

Ferremo winced inwardly. He was cold and drenched—and his boots were getting muddy—but he could not disappoint, not at this stage. "Yes, master."

I wilt send a carriage to meet you outside the docks. Hurry now. You show yourself too late, and they'll suspect. We can't have that.

No indeed, Ferremo thought to himself. All his master's plans hinged on the next step and a single woman.

There were things in the world, Tennora thought, that defied logic, defied expectation, and made one wonder if

anything one had been taught was true after all. She held out hope for those things, the way a sailor's wife lights a candle in the window even when the sea is full of storms—her lost love may come back one day.

And there were things in the world, she thought, that were the fancy of madness or the fantasy of liars and cheats, and that made one wonder why one trusted anybody at all. Things that made one want to snuff the candle out.

"You're a dragon," Tennora said, slowly. "But you turned into a woman when you encountered spellplague."

Clytemorrenestrix rolled her eyes. "Yes. Didn't I say that?"

"Yes," Tennora said. Mad. Mad as the wizard under the mountain, she thought. "I wanted to make certain I heard you correctly." She glanced over the woman's flawless skin. "You don't have a spellscar."

The woman's face contorted in a scowl. "My whole *body* is a spellscar. At any rate I don't see how it matters. You do not need to know these things to bring me to Aundra Blacklock."

"I never said—"

Mardin interrupted with two plates of roast squab in rustic rosemary gravy. "Here you are, my dear, and one for your new friend." He looked expectantly at Tennora.

Tennora took a deep breath to ward off her rising anxiety. The woman couldn't be a dragon—that was impossible. Either she was toying with Tennora or she was mad. There was no other sensible explanation.

But what of the moment of fear that rushed up inside Tennora when she met the woman's eyes? What of the smell of lightning?

What of the fact that Tennora felt certain in the hollow of her heart that Clytemorrenestrix was telling the truth?

"This is ..." Tennora frowned. Even if she could say the woman's name right, Mardin might know what it meant, and then what? "May I call you Nestrix?" "If you must," Clytemorrenestrix said.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, dear lady." Mardin took up one of her hands to kiss it, but Nestrix pulled away with a look of disgust. Mardin shifted awkwardly and looked to Tennora for an explanation.

"She ..." Tennora started. Then shrugged. "She's had a long day."

Mardin raised an eyebrow, but did not press the matter. "Well, enjoy your meals," he said, and returned to his post behind the counter. He glanced back at Tennora, as if he knew she wasn't saying everything. As if he thought she should have.

The blue eyes met Tennora's again. "It's better not to tell him," Nestrix said. "Adventurers are excitable. Even if they aren't adventuring."

"How did you know he was an adventurer?"

Nestrix shrugged—a jerky, self-conscious gesture, as if she'd learned it from watching someone else and was still testing it out. "They have a *look*."

She's so uncomfortable in her skin, Tennora thought, pulling apart her squab. She shook her head—plenty of people looked awkward and none of them were dragons. She herself felt uncomfortable in her own skin more often than she cared to admit. She was being fanciful, just as Aunt Aowena always said.

"If you'd take your head out of the clouds for a change," she'd said over highsunfeast, "you'd see the world of opportunities you already have!" Then she'd gone on to name—as some of those opportunities—the Marchenors' son and the nephew of one of Eckhart's hunting friends.

"Will you take me to Blacklock or not?" Nestrix said.

Tennora passed her mug from one hand to the other. "Why do you want to talk to her?"

"That isn't your business."

"Look," Tennora said, "Aundra isn't an easy person to get to. If you want my help, you're going to have to give me a good reason."

Nestrix narrowed her eyes at Tennora. "I could kill you if you don't."

"I'm not afraid of you," Tennora said, though it was half a lie. Dragon or not, the woman still had a dangerous look to her.

The smell of summer storms rose again and vanished. A chill ran up Tennora's spine. Nestrix turned away, glaring at the fireplace.

"I have heard she's found a way to reverse the affects of the Spellplague," Nestrix said. "That she can repair the

Weave in very limited locations. If she can do that, I will never have to worry about you not fearing me again." She turned back to Tennora. "You can't understand what it's like to look in the mirror and not recognize yourself, time and time again for over a century."

"I don't think it's that strange to. ..." Tennora trailed off as what Nestrix had said settled into place in her mental timeline. Over a century. Her eyes widened. "Shar pass us over. ... You mean ... *the* Spellplague? The Year of Blue Fire?"

"Of course," Nestrix said, picking at a leg of squab. "What did you think I meant?"

"A ... a pocket." Tennora shrugged. "Little bits of spell storm that pop up now and again." She studied the woman across from her. "You *can't* be a hundred years old."

Nestrix scowled. "Of course not. I'm five hundred and sixty-eight. And what little trace of spellplague could do this?" She gestured at her body as if it were scaled and slimy and not well muscled and pleasantly curvy. "I am plaguechanged, make no mistake."

"But you're not dead," Tennora said. "You should be dead. No human lives that long. Not anymore. In stories maybe—"

"I haven't the faintest idea how this works," Nestrix said, sounding irritated. "I may look like one of you, but I kept certain skills. My proper lifespan appears to be one of them."

"And the fear." Tennora leaned in closer. "What else?"

Nestrix smiled and Tennora found herself expecting serrated teeth—but they were even and flat. "If you help me, perhaps I'll show you. What do you say, thief?"

Tennora frowned. "I'm no thief."

"No? Thieves have a look too." Nestrix leaned across the table and sniffed audibly. "Ah, no—a wizard. With guano under her nails, cobwebs in her pockets, and ink on her fingertips." She leaned back.

"I'm not a wizard either," Tennora said.

"Then what are you?"

"Nothing. 'It seems no mastery burns within me,'" she said glumly.

Nestrix grinned. "Even I know those are Ahghairon's words. Don't quote your texts and tell me you're no wizard."

"I am a wizard as you are a dragon," Tennora said. "I was, and now I'm not." "Perhaps you should try your hand at being a thief," Nestrix said. "You have the look."

The tirade Aunt Aowena would unleash if that ever happened—punctuated, of course, by her fainting and Uncle Eckhart's blustering curses—was enough to give Tennora a prescient headache. She rubbed her temple.

Nestrix was watching her expectantly.

"I'm not opposed to helping you," Tennora said as diplomatically as she could manage, "but I have to say ... I don't think Aundra's going to give you what you ask for."

"Of course she will. She has to."

"It's just ... I mean, maybe I'm wrong, but what sort of dragon were you?"

Nestrix looked as if Tennora had slapped her. "You can't *tell*? What sort of wizard are you?"

"I already told you, I'm not a wizard—"

"Well, you *were*," Nestrix said, crossing her arms. "You should be able to tell. Or is that why you aren't anymore? You're too stupid?"

Tennora felt her cheeks flush. "I have a stlarning good idea. And even if I didn't, I'm betting I'd be guessing some colors that Aundra's not going to be interested in giving her charity to."

Nestrix's hand slapped down on Tennora's, and fear rushed toward her again. But it broke on Tennora's anger, and she felt it wash over her and away. She pulled back from Nestrix. "I am not stupid," she said. "And neither is Aundra."

Nestrix narrowed her eyes. "Your Aundra Blacklock knows nothing about me. If she won't help, then fine—I'll look elsewhere. But there's little fairness in assuming because my cousins are nasty to you, that I will be as well. I just want my life back." She fell silent for a moment, then added, "And for your information, anyone I've killed deserved it. Or do *you* allow strangers to wander through your home, taking your things and poking you with sticks?"

"No," Tennora said, "but I don't kill them if they do." "That's your weakness."

"And I don't insult people I'm asking for help. Now go away, or I'll call Mardin over and you can see how excitable he can be."

"You haven't even heard my offer," Nestrix said, folding her hands. "You want to be better at casting spells, don't

you? You want to be a wizard again?"

Tennora hesitated. "Yes."

"I know a ritual that will help you."

Tennora shook her head. Why did she ever believe any of this? "No, you can't. I know enough about rituals. There's no such thing, and even if there were, you can't possibly be powerful enough to cast it."

"There might not be such a ritual now," Nestrix said. "But that's because you people lost it when the Blue Fire came."

"If it's from before the Spellplague, it won't work." "It *might* not work. But that doesn't mean a clever girl like you couldn't adapt it."

"Why do you have it? Are you a wizard?"

"Hardly. My mate was a spellcaster. He found the ritual and taught me to cast it on him. I do not claim to know much about spellcasting, but I could tell it made him very happy indeed."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead."

"I'm sorry."

"He was fortunate." She glared at the fireplace again. "I'm sorry I said you were stupid." She did not sound sorry. "Will you please help me?"

"How am I supposed to trust you?" But the truth was, she already did—in her gut, she trusted every word that Nestrix

had said. Her mind knew better. It was a bad idea to trust a stranger, and a worse one to trust a dragon.

Nestrix looked at her thoughtfully. "Coins wouldn't do it ... not for you. And a promise—well, if you'd take that, you wouldn't be asking." She considered her a moment longer and sighed heavily. She unfastened the pouch from around her neck and handed it to Tennora. "That is my guarantee and yours."

Tennora loosened the neck and peered inside. It had been stuffed with batting and rags. She nudged those aside and found, nestled in the middle, the curve of an eggshell. It was mottled blue and thick as a porcelain bowl.

"You bring me to Aundra Blacklock, I'll teach you the ritual," Nestrix said. "You keep that safe, I will not kill you."

"What is it?"

"A shell from my first clutch," she said. "It's what I have left of them. If you damage it, then I will kill you after all." This she said in as matter-of-fact a tone as she'd used when she'd described their deal.

"All right," Tennora said. "I'll do as you ask. But if Aundra won't see you, then I hand this back and you go on your way."

"Of course," Nestrix said.

Tennora slipped the pouch over her neck. It was lighter than it looked.

You shouldn't trust her, she told herself once more, but it was the memory of her mother's voice that rose up and caught her attention.

"Your wits are very useful," she'd said more than once. "But if your gut disagrees, your wits aren't worth much at all."

"I'll go settle with Mardin."

When she reached the bar, Mardin set aside the mug he was drying and came over to her. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Everything's fine," she said. He gave her a skeptical look. "It is. Look, what do I owe?" "Your coins are no good today, petal." He glanced over at Nestrix. "Who is she? What does she want?"

"Someone I met. Tell me or I'll just give you a pile of them."

"Fine, six coppers. But you tell me if you need help. Where did you meet her?"

"Out." Tennora counted out the coins. "Mardin, I can take care of myself."

"I know you can—wouldn't be your mother's daughter if you couldn't. But that woman looks a mite like the scorchkettle that was shouting in the street earlier."

"Funny," Tennora said. "I hadn't noticed."

"Be careful." He leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "And I'll say no more."

No more, Tennora thought, until tomorrow. Or until someone else asked him, and he told his new favorite patron all about dear little Tennora.

Truly, she adored Mardin as if he were her blood uncle. But between Mardin, Aunt Aowena, Uncle Eckhart, and—until lately—Master Halnian, she felt as if too many people were pulling her in too many directions. She could take care of herself, walk her own path, couldn't she?

But oh, how disappointed they'd all be if she didn't listen to them. If she told Aunt Aowena outright that her offer was insulting. If she told Uncle Eckhart she wasn't afraid of her neighbors and only a fool would be. If she told Mardin that she wasn't twelve years old anymore, sweet and quiet standing behind her mother's perfumed skirts, and she knew what she was risking and wanted to risk it anyway.

"It is best," her mother had said on more than one occasion, "to show your elders a polite face and a smile, and please them if you can. There are too many watching for you to miss a step and prove yourself unworthy of your father's name."

And much as Tennora tried not to care, to break herself of the well-trained reactions and choking politeness, she found herself falling back into them like a wheel into a rut.

She was so lost in her own thoughts, she nearly crashed into a man in a hooded stormcloak. She looked up and realized he wasn't a man but a half-orc, broad-shouldered and taller than her by head and a half.

"Sorry," she said, moving to the side. But the half-orc didn't move.

He grabbed her hand—his own was the size of a dessert plate—and pressed a piece of paper into it. "I must warn you. There isn't much time."

Oh gods, Tennora thought. A zealot. The market teemed with them, and some days they wandered down the street of the God Catcher trying to collect souls and alms. They were harmless, and more often than not their intentions were in the right place. But Tennora's soul was perfectly content, and its comportment—as her aunt would say—was not the business of a shifty-looking beggar.

But it was late, and he looked so concerned. She stifled her groan, smiled, and folded the leaflet, stuffing it in her pocket. "Thank you," she said pleasantly, and slipped to one side. "I promise I'll look at it later." If she was lucky there wouldn't be printing on one side and she could use it for notes. She pressed a few coppers into his hand and stepped around him to collect Nestrix and head home to the God Catcher.

Veron watched Nestrix and Tennora leave, twisting the fabric of his sleeve in one hand. He'd expected her to be startled, maybe for her to cry out or tell him off. He hadn't expected to be ignored and turned aside like that. He turned to the bartender.

"You were talking to her," he said. "Do you know where she lives?"

Mardin grunted. "What makes you think I'm daft enough to tell you that?" He looked Veron up and down. "You her fancyman? Veron startled. "I'm sorry?"

The bartender chuckled. "I don't judge. You ask me, my girl needs to find herself a nice fellow. In my book, anybody who cleans up his mess like you did with them pigeon bones gets a good mark, don't matter who his father is. So you can tell me. Passing her love notes?"

Veron felt his cheeks burn. "No, no—just ... a concerned party. That person she's speaking to is trouble."

"She can handle it," Mardin said, picking up another mug.

"I don't think—"

"Do you know who that girl's mother was?" Mardin said. Veron Angalen shook his head. "Liferna Uskevren—and if you never heard of her, it just proves she was better at her trade than anyone under the sun before she took up with that Hedare boy, fell in love and into 'society.' A whole line of clever women and not a few damn clever men leads up to that one. Ruthless enough to get the job done, good-hearted enough to come back for you when the odds are tough. Tennora can take care of herself." Mardin frowned. "Though it's easy to forget that."

"She'll need to remember soon enough." Veron paid his bill and looked out the window at the God Catcher. The two women entered through the large door below the statue's chin. He should have been quicker.

He would have to be quicker next time. He was close, closer than he'd ever been.

THREE

The God Catcher had quieted down by the time Tennora climbed up the twisting stairs, Nestrix in tow. The children were all tucked into their beds, their families finishing up the day's chores. Behind other doors came the murmur of her neighbors conversing genially and easily with their lovers and friends. A conversation here and there slid through the thin walls—the price of wheat's gone up and there are rumors of blue lightning around Blackstaff Tower and did you see that young man skulking around the square? Tennora caught snippets of them, but her own thoughts were turned squarely toward the tall woman walking behind her—and the leather bag hanging around her own neck.

It was like something out of a legend or one of Mardin's stories. A dragon trapped in the form of a woman—better yet, a dragon who had seen the Spellplague with her own eyes. She had probably seen all sorts of marvels, traveling over Faerun. The Sea of Fallen Stars; the Plaguewrought Land; the city of Airspur. Tennora wondered if she could see them all before she died. She gave her head a little shake as she reached the door of her apartment.

"You're a bright girl," her uncle Eckhart had told her on more than one occasion. "Why, Selune preserve us, would you waste that on daydreaming and fantasy when you could be focusing your mind on improving your status? Or at the least something useful like a trade?" He was right, of course—daydreaming about visiting the earthmotes over Chult wasn't terribly useful. She indulged herself nevertheless, and added a dragon to her dream.

She was jolted from it by the small, dusty trunk resting against her door. For a moment it seemed so out of place it might have sprouted there on its own. Then she remembered her aunt and the trunk of Tennora's mother's things she had sent along.

Tennora sighed. Much as she wanted to go through it, it would have to wait until Nestrix was gone. She reached over it to unlock the door, then dragged the trunk in behind her.

Tennora's apartment rested at the joint that led to the outstretched arm of the statue. It was small, but it was inexpensive and afforded her a lovely view of the square below and the edge of Market Street over the next building.

"This is your den?" Nestrix said, looking around dubiously.

"It's my apartment, yes." Tennora lugged the trunk a safe distance from the door, then hung her stormcloak on the peg and secured the latch. "Have a seat."

"Where?" Nestrix said, looking around the crowded and compact room.

"On the chair." Tennora pulled it out pointedly. "I know this place is small, but it suits me."

More than that—Tennora loved her apartment. The kitchen was simple and cozy, with a neat little hearth that warmed the whole space. Two of the walls were lined with bookshelves, and her bed was tucked away on a platform over her kitchen where the chimney warmed it. And all of it was hers—a far and pleasant cry from the capacious Hedare manor, its empty and lavish rooms, its overworked gardens, and its cold and lonely library.

She had come to study wizardry relatively late, and quickly saw that the distance between Master Halnian's tower, where she took most of her lessons; the House of Wonder, where her tests were administered; and the Hedare manor was enough to drive her to quit for the sake of convenience. At eighteen she had come to the God Catcher where Mardin had mentioned some of her classmates roomed, looking for a place of her own. It had taken the space of a heartbeat for Tennora to fall in love with the cozy, peculiar apartment in the shoulder of the God Catcher. It was hers, all hers, and just big enough to keep her in, happy and secure.

Nestrix sat on the edge of the chair, unimpressed. "What are all those books for?"

Tennora shrugged. "For reading. Those are histories. These over here are my books on magic. That shelf is all chapbooks. Romances, adventures. Some mystery puzzle stories, but I think they're often too easy to figure out. Or too ridiculous."

"Oh." Nestrix gave her a blank look. "Where is Blacklock?"

"Away, most likely," Tennora said. She went into the kitchen. "We'll try to contact her tomorrow. Would you like some tea?"

"No." She glanced around the room again and sighed. "Oh fine, all right."

Tennora hung the kettle over the fire and stirred up the coals. There was a dragon in her sitting room. She measured out a fragrant mix of tea and rose petals to add to the water. She was making tea for a dragon in her sitting room. She

took two teacups from the wash water and dried them on her skirt. A dragon in her sitting room.

She was grinning like a fool. If her day had to be a terrible one, then at least it had ended with this. Strange and wonderful and worth talking about. And the promise of the ritual! She poured the tea and carried the cups out to the sitting room. Nestrix was staring out the window at the sphere.

"Here we are," she said, taking her cup and perching on a stack of books.

"That is where she lives?" She looked back at Tennora. "There's no door."

"There's a door. It's magical. Only Aundra can open it."

Nestrix frowned. "But how does she reach it? You'd have to fly to get there."

"And that's what she does," Tennora said. "She flies right up."

"How?" Nestrix asked, still staring at the sphere.

"With her wings," Tennora said. "You didn't know Aundra was a raptoran?"

Nestrix folded her arms over her chest. "No. No one mentioned it."

"She looks like a woman crossed with a hawk," Tennora said. Nestrix glared at her. "Did I say I didn't know what a raptoran was?" she said.

"No," Tennora said, "I just thought ... I mean, they aren't exactly filling the streets." Raptorans were an elusive race, tucking their cities into high, sheer cliffs in the Yehimal Mountains far to the east. Few people in Faerun could identify a raptoran, let alone say that they'd met one. Tennora had only seen her reclusive landlady a few times, but each meeting she couldn't help but marvel at Aundra Blacklock, with her enormous feathered wings and her piercing yellow eyes.

Nestrix sighed, turned toward the window, and said nothing.

It would be a very long evening, Tennora thought, if this kept on. She sipped her tea, all too conscious of the weight of the heavy silence filling the room. Nestrix stared out the window as if the sphere would vanish if she took her eyes off it. That tore at Tennora's heart a little—the poor thing had likely seen plenty snatched out of her grasp. Not the least of which was the world before the Blue Fire.

"What was it like?" Tennora asked. "Before the Spellplague."

Nestrix looked back at her and frowned as if confused by the question. "Not that different."

Tennora blinked. "Not that different?"

"Well, the *world* is still here, and it's still full of *dokaal* and treasures and threats and everything else. It looks different." She gave her hand a distasteful look. "But it's still the same world. Just as one who makes it through a fight is still the same self, even if she's bruised and bleeding and missing an eye. It's the features that change, and while that's the more important question—How has my life changed?—the world is not that different, in the end."

"I never thought of it like that."

"*Dokaal* never do. Even elves—you'd think they'd take the long view, but not this time. You're terribly narrow-minded."

"You keep saying that—*dokaal*. What's it mean?"

"It means you and your ilk," Nestrix said with a careless wave of her hand.

"Humans?"

"Human, elves, dwarves, halflings, those bastard *strixiki* that came with the fire—all you two-legs. *Darastrix* slayers, treasure-makers, magic-breakers." She sighed. "Perhaps it's because you lost your gods? Presumably that makes everything feel like it's changed. I don't think you could escape the dragon gods if you tried."

"Where were you," Tennora said softly, "when it happened? When the Blue Fire came."

Nestrix's gaze grew distant. "The Calim. I lived most of my life there. There were no genasi then, no genie slavers. Just wealthy, foolish humans who hung themselves all over with jewels and gold and thought themselves clever for it. Great sprawling cities that sent out caravans through the djinn's desert and were always surprised when they didn't come back." She grinned. "I should have liked to grow old in that desert, where the riches came to you. Not as safe now. The genasi are bellicose and brutal with outsiders."

"Where else did you live?"

"Plenty of places," Nestrix said. "The Raurin—that was where I found my mate. My Tantlevgithus." She sighed

heavily. "Now it's full of *dokaal* building dead civilizations, but it's still the purple desert where my mate and I danced in the storms." She sighed again, her blue eyes focusing on someplace long ago and far away, and Tennora thought that features changing might be bad enough, at least for Nestrix.

"And Waterdeep?" Tennora said, trying to change the subject. "What was it like?"

Nestrix regarded her curiously. "I wouldn't know. I'd never come so far north as this. Besides, everyone knows the dragonward makes Waterdeep unbearable without proper protection."

"Oh," Tennora said. She should have remembered that. "But you're all right now? The dragonward isn't affecting you."

"No," Nestrix said icily.

"Good." Tennora smiled and ran a nervous hand over her blonde braid. "I find history fascinating. Particularly Waterdeep's. This square is a good spot for it. The paving dates back to Baeron Silmaeril's time as the Open Lord. The newer stuff was peeled up when the statue fell, I expect."

"What statue?"

Tennora laughed. "The one you're sitting in. It was one of the Walking Statues."

"This?" Nestrix looked around her.

"It was, yes. The Year of Blue Fire made the statues all come to life. No one could control them—not the Blackstaff, not the Masked Lords. They destroyed huge swaths of the city. This one, they say, used to stand near the sea wall. It

was making its way toward the old market when a wizard—they always say the Blackstaff, but there were plenty of powerful wizards in Waterdeep those days and everyone claims she was in their district at the time—tried to stop it. She couldn't command it, so she made the ground beneath it soft as mud. The statue collapsed, but as it fell, it reached up toward the heavens as if it asked the gods for their forgiveness. Another feature changed, I suppose."

Nestrix snorted. "Why would a statue ask the gods for anything?"

"It's just how the story goes." Tennora shrugged. "Though it might be true. I don't suppose anyone ever knows what's going on in the mind of a magical statue." She smiled. "Well, nowadays, a family of half-elves lives there." Nestrix eyed her, puzzled for a moment, until Tennora blushed. "It was a joke."

"Oh." Nestrix reached for her teacup. "Is that why you studied magic then? Because you live in a magic den?"

"No." Tennora fought the urge to sigh. "I ... I thought it was interesting. And beautiful. I always wanted to be a wizard. My teacher says I'm no good at magic though."

"Find a different teacher," Nestrix said. "Or a different magic."

Tennora shrugged. "I don't think that will work. At least not right now."

"What else would you do?"

"My aunt and uncle want me to be a proper young lady and fall in love with a proper young man so his proper family and theirs can forge a connection. They're still afraid no one

takes them very seriously as a noble family, I suppose," she added as she sipped her tea. "We've only had a title for three generations."

Nestrix was eyeing her again, her eyes wide as if Tennora had admitted to leaping off buildings in her spare time.

"Do dragons not make connections that way?" Tennora asked.

"I cannot speak for *other* dragons," Nestrix said, "but no self-respecting blue would suggest such a thing. Sire, dam, mate, offspring, enemy." She counted them off on her long fingers. "These are your connections. Anything else you do for your own gain." She drained the tea, then added, "If your aunt were the clutchmate of *my* darn, I would tear her throat out for suggesting I am a mere tool for her games. You don't have the teeth for such an attack, but you could probably find something to do it for you. You *dokaal* are good at that."

Tennora's mouth fell open.

"One of those grain-cutters, perhaps," Nestrix said, thoughtfully, making a hook of her finger. "What do you call those?"

"Scythes. And I don't ... That isn't how things are done," Tennora managed, "but thank you ... for sharing. At any rate, studying wizardry this way was a compromise. I studied at the House of Magic under a master they found suitable, with fellow apprentices whose friendships might be valuable, and I could put off joining society for a little longer. Only, I wasn't terribly good at magic. At least not the way my master teaches it."

The way anyone teaches it, she silently added, remembering the fireball.

"Now that you are no longer a wizard," Nestrix said, "must you go mate for your aunt and uncle's status? Do they decide what you do?"

Tennora ignored the crude description. "I don't know. I haven't figured out what I'm going to do now. It's all sort of falling to pieces." Her voice cracked as she spoke, and she turned away.

Nestrix regarded her for a long moment, in a way that was not predatory, not speculative, nor even confused. She looked weary. She set down her mug and leaned forward onto her knees.

"I will tell you something I have learned," she said. "And I do not do this lightly, so be grateful and listen."

"It is easy to forget, when we are sated, that we may only live our lives—no matter how long or short they may be—from one sunrise to the next. Until the Blue Fire came, I forgot this often, but since then it is the only way I can make my way through the world. I suggest you concern yourself with what is at hand and leave tomorrow to tomorrow."

Tennora frowned. "But it remains rather pressing."

"Not as pressing as finding me a place to sleep," Nestrix said with a wide, white smile.

With the point of his knife, Ferremo picked at a sliver of apple skin lodged between his teeth. The half-elf woman next to him watched out of the corner of her eyes with barely disguised horror. He stopped and wiped the blade on his handkerchief, sucking at the gums where he'd pried the offending bit loose.

"What's wrong, Alina?" he said, wagging the knife at her. "Do you have something stuck as well?"

Her gaze shot back to the manor across the road. "Not a bit," she said.

Poor Alina, he thought. She wasn't long for their way of life. She had a good hand with disarming wards, but she was otherwise too clumsy, too obvious. If she didn't get herself killed, she'd be out of the master's service any day now. Ferremo gave her until midwinter.

The damnable rain had finally slowed to a faint drizzle—enough that he wasn't going to get soaked anymore, but neither would he and Alina look out of place huddled under the archway that led down Ivory Street. The perfect place to watch.

The house was one of Waterdeep's city manors. Three stories; marble everywhere; a big, warded, curly iron gate across the path; and glowballs dripping off every corner of the wall. Wealthy—very wealthy.

Even in the rain, deliveries arrived at the servants' entrance every hour or so, deep into the night. Bundles of linens, cases of candles, an ocean of wine. The last time Ferremo had watched so many delights pass into that house, the owner had thrown an elaborate brightstarfeast two nights later. For nearly a year now he had watched her home until he knew by the deliveries what she would be doing, when she would be doing it, and for how long she would be preoccupied.

And two nights hence, the mistress of the house would be entertaining late into the night, too interested in her guests' gowns and gossip, too soaked in the many bottles of

zzar and wine to notice what might be happening in the far corners of her manor.

Twice he had managed to slip into the manor with little trouble. A common thug might stick out, unwashed and displaying all the grace and sartorial aplomb of a muddy haystack. But Ferremo had observed the uniforms the hired servants wore, and dictated their design to his seamstress with exacting specificity. The first time he had simply found his way in and then found his way out. The second though, he had killed one of the hired men, stored the body under a flowering bush, and taken his place for the whole night, memorizing the floor plan of the building.

"How long do we need to stand out here?" Alina asked.

Ferremo revised his estimate—midautumn at best. He looked up at a window on the second floor, far from the kitchens and the ballroom and the gardens, and mentally charted the path he would take to reach it. He hoped in two days it wouldn't be raining.

"Not long," he said. "Wait here and look like you belong."

He walked away from the manor and cut through an alley, so that if anyone was watching, he would seem to come at the house from a different direction. While out of sight, he pulled a tricorne hat from his pocket, popped it up, and settled it on his head. He turned his cloak inside out to show the green lining, adjusted it so that it hung open over his right arm, and slid around the knives he wore to lie beneath it. By the time he came out onto the road, he looked respectable and vaguely shabby—from head to toe a haggard messenger from another house, out too late.

As he approached the gate, a face coalesced out of the iron. The curls coiled into eyes and stretched into lips, the

metal shrieking faintly as it did.

"Well met and welcome to the House of the Laughing Star," the face in the gate said. "Are you expected?"

"Well met. Unfortunately no," Ferremo said. "I have a message from my master for the goodwoman."

The gate was silent for a moment. "Enter," it creaked, and swung open, its face splitting in twain. Ferremo stepped onto the path and hurried toward the front door, which was already opening. A dour-looking woman in a well-cut but boring gray gown held the door—the goodwoman's chamberlain, Agnea Palthas, he knew from previous experience. She stopped him on the last step.

"Well met. I understand you have a letter," she said. "You can give it to me. I'll bring it to Goodwoman Mrays."

Ferremo drew back a little. "I've been told to deliver it only to Goodwoman Mrays's hands."

A shadow fell over him. A half-orc the size of a small hill, with a neat beard and clad all in silk. A waste, Ferremo thought, and smiled up at the bodyguard chief he knew was called Jorik. The pair of them were the gatekeepers of the house, Nazra Mrays's eyes and ears. The half-orc folded his arms over his chest.

"No one comes in at this hour," Jorik said. "Hand over the letter and we shall see it to our mistress's hand."

Ferremo eyed the half-orc long enough to give a good show, then held out the letter. Agnea snatched it from him.

"A good evening to you," she said, and shut the door.

Ferremo stood for a moment, staring up at the windows and the fine mist of rain drifting through the light. The fools thought themselves better than him. He smiled again, and turned and walked back down the pathway.

"Master?" he said as he passed through the gate. "We're ready."

The envelope is within?

"Yes."

Are you certain?

Ferremo pursed his mouth briefly. "It is hard to mistake."

We will test it when you return, his master said. Hurry back. We have only two days to prepare.

Tennora lay in a bed made of many blankets, the chair, and the trunk she had still not opened, staring up at the ceiling. A shaft of moonlight eased through the window and painted a stripe across the floor. Her hands wrapped around the pouch at her throat, and she chewed thoughtfully on her lip.

Above her, in the loft Tennora usually slumbered in, Nestrix slept.

Or at least Tennora hoped she was sleeping. She hadn't worked up the nerve to check. Only now, in the night, was she rethinking her plan.

Her aunt and uncle's admonishments about Tennora's fanciful tendencies argued with her mother's voice telling her to trust her instincts, and the warring voices churned up

her thoughts, making it almost impossible for Tennora to sleep.

It was as good a time as any to see what was in the trunk.

She lit a candle and pulled it out into the center of the room. The lock that dangled from the latch was old and corroded. A few quick strikes with the bone hilt of a knife knocked it open. A shiver ran over Tennora's arms as she opened the chest.

The top was a shallow bed lined with mildew-spotted fabric that might have once been green. A layer of tarnished coins, a thimble, a tindertwig long past its usefulness, some cheap but pretty jewelry—Tennora picked them up, one by one, wondering at their importance, their meanings to her mother. They had to be from before her mother married, a time Tennora knew little about.

Liferna Hedare hadn't been a noblewoman when she met Tennora's father—Tennora knew that much. She told Tennora her people had come from the west after the tumultuous time following the Spellplague known as the Wailing Years, and that she had lived all her life in Waterdeep, in Field Ward.

She had no siblings. Her parents were dead. That was that.

Tennora imagined a younger version of her mother delighting in the red glass beads of the bracelet or the bright brass locket on that necklace. Sewing her clothes with the little thimble on her thumb. Tying up her blonde hair with the strap of leather that had since hardened into a stick. She pulled out a trio of small freshwater pearls on a string—her mother had loved pearls.

Tennora pulled the tray from the trunk, setting it on the floor beside her.

A new smell mingled with the mildew—the smell of tallow and beeswax. The deeper part of the trunk held several cotton-wrapped bundles, neatly packed and only faintly stained. Tennora pulled a long, thin one out and laid it in her lap to unroll the fabric, giddy as a child opening a gift.

The bundle held a dagger.

Tennora was so startled to see it she nearly dropped it. The sheath was tooled with a carving of a phoenix. She took the hilt in a trembling hand and drew the blade. Well oiled and untouched by the mildew or rust. Sharp too, she found, touching the end of it.

She didn't know much about weapons, to be certain, but she knew it was not a blade for a girl in the Field Ward. Not a blade for chopping vegetables, cutting lengths of rope, or even gutting fish. It could have done all those things, but it was too fine to be wasted that way. Tennora slid it back into the sheath.

A family heirloom, perhaps? Something carried over from the nebulous west, cared for so carefully and tucked away? She nodded to herself, imagining a man with her mother's brown eyes and blond hair in war-scarred armor, with the dagger at his hip. That made the most sense.

Tennora took out the next bundle, which held a leather vam-brace. A good sturdy one, scarred over so much that the black leather seemed to be tooled with waving grasses.

A family heirloom, she thought, though the surety wavered. It was fit for a slim woman's arm. Slimmer than her

own. Slim as her mother's.

Tennora laughed. Her prim and painfully proper mother. Dressed in leather armor and carrying a sharp dagger. The woman whose daily refrain to Tennora was to smile and be polite, to not upset Old Lord Hedare or her grandmother. The old man would have had a fit of shock if he could have seen his daughter-in-law in leather armor.

More bundles revealed more pieces of armor, each carefully treated and wrapped away from the change of seasons. A pair of boots with crepe-soft soles that could have walked through a forest in autumn without making a sound. Gloves with a faint and mediocre enchantment that had unraveled slowly in the years since its activation. They seemed so pristine that Tennora paused to check the trunk for the telltale traces of a spell that would have preserved the leather. Nothing. Liferna had known how to pack such things away.

Tennora's heart was starting to pound. What were these things? Why had her mother had them? Liferna had been in the ground five years, yet Tennora felt the sudden urge to find her—to dig her up with her bare hands—and demand to know what these artifacts of her old life meant. What she had kept from her daughter.

She took the last of the bundles from the chest, one that was small and streaked with rust. She unrolled it to find a smaller cloth roll nestled inside. Inside the smaller roll were thirty-two badly rusted wires. Tennora pulled one out and studied it for a moment. It had a sturdy handle, and the thinner end curved into a crescent moon shape.

For a moment, she just pondered that shape.

Then she realized what she was holding. Lockpicks.

Lockpicks were not a family heirloom, not so far as Tennora could see. Her heart was in her throat. Why had her mother owned lockpicks?

To pick locks, you fool, she thought. What else?

Her mother had been so proper, so boring in her easy adherence to the niceties of the North Ward.

And yet buried somewhere underneath her effortless manners and graceful charm, beneath the hostess and the wife and the mother, there might have been a creature who moved in the darkness with a well-kept weapon in her hand, finding her way through locked doors—How? How could mild-mannered, easily laughing Mesial Hedare have tamed that creature of the night into a house pet—her wings clipped, her teeth filed, her manner calm and subdued?

Tennora shook herself. Fanciful tendencies. There must be another answer.

She reached into the chest. Perhaps she'd missed something—a letter from a long-dead aunt requesting Liferna hold on to her things, maybe. Nothing. The chest was empty.

Or perhaps not. Tennora frowned. The hand that brushed the bottom of the trunk sat a solid three inches from the ground. A false bottom.

It would not pry up when scratched her fingernails at the edges. Tennora picked up the dagger, ready to slam the hilt into the thin wood—

She looked up at the loft, at Nestrix sleeping there. Even though she'd slept through the breaking of the lock, the woman was bound to wake if she heard Tennora smashing

open the bottom of the trunk—Tennora felt certain. Much as she wanted to know what was in the box, she should wait. She *would* wait—she needed to think, to find her way out of the tangle of thoughts that would overwhelm her.

She stood, feeling oddly light-headed—unmoored and empty. As if she had nothing left to stand on. Her steps uneven, she crossed to the window and nudged the shutters open. Fresh air would help.

Below, the City of Splendors stretched out, lights shining like jewels scattered all the way up to the black silk of the Sea of Swords. Selune hung full and bright above her. The God Catcher gleamed in the moon's light. She sat on the ledge and leaned against the sill. A cool breeze ran over her skin. The remains of the clouds from earlier scattered.

One of the statue's eyes had been knocked out to form a window, and from the socket a flimsy drape hung, limp as torn flesh. The other eye, a great carved orb the size of the trunk sitting in Tennora's living room, stared up at her. The statue's other features wavered uncomfortably in the midst of masculine and feminine, youth and age—full lips, hard chin, round cheeks. She wondered who it had been meant to look like. A hero, or the sculptor's lover, or a god with a fickle form?

From where she sat, Tennora could just make out the shadows and lights of other Walking Statues, now fallen or frozen. Against Mount Waterdeep, the dark humps of the prone warrior who had become Downgiant Row. The tall and listing silhouette to the north of Sparaunt Tower, its hawklike beak illumined by a line of magical lights. The crown of a seated man, the suggestion of leather armor carved into his chest and limbs, peeking over the buildings of the Castle

Ward, the edges of his stone hairline traced by the lights of the tavern built in his lap.

Time had not forgotten the fallen statues. The city had rebuilt the damage they had caused when the Spellplague had erupted, and then continued building, hollowing out the fallen statues and laying stonework over the tops of their feet.

Tennora looked down at the face of the God Catcher. It was easy to forget what those carved eyes had seen, what horrors and wonders they had witnessed. She thought back to what Nestrix had said about the way the world had or had not changed, and she wondered how wild a lie she had been told.

Then the eye below blinked.

Tennora startled, sliding back off the windowsill as she did.

The lips parted with a crack, and the God Catcher sighed, the dry and powdery breath gusting up at her. The moon brightened and turned faintly blue, and the stars burned through the blanket of the night.

"A tempest is coming," the statue said, its voice clattering like a rockslide. It lowered the hand it normally held outstretched, and with it the sphere of Aundra Blacklock. The sphere settled into its palm and it turned its great head, shattering years of gull droppings. "I feel it in the ground. The door is left wide and the path uncovers itself."

Tennora froze, too startled to move.

In the distance the other statues cracked to life as they lifted their heads, the murmur of a half dozen other stone voices echoing the God Catcher. "The door is left wide."

The sphere in its hand shimmered, and there appeared atop it a woman of sorts wrapped in a cloak of feathered wings. Aundra Blacklock stood as still as a statue herself.

"What else do you see in your dreams?" she said.

The God Catcher gave a low, growling hum. "A blue stone. A spiral of vultures. A gathering storm."

"Spellplague?" Aundra whispered. "Does the Blue Fire return?"

"There is Blue Fire here, but it sleeps, as it sleeps in us. Beware that one—it will flush out the vultures. For good or ill."

"What good do buzzards bring?" Aundra said. "What else?" "A child walks in the storm," the statues chanted in a single voice. Tennora's ears rang with the sound. "The vultures follow. A path reveals itself, old stones that have seen many feet and lain beneath the sand for many more years. The key is the singer's collar. The lodestone is the first lord's gift."

"Is the child the plaguechanged one?"

"It is," the statues said. "And it is not."

Aundra's wings twitched. "You speak in riddles, Old Ones," she said. "This information does not aid me."

"We speak truth. We always speak truth," the God Catcher rumbled. "The future unfolds itself in myriad ways."

You will discern the proper path. Or the city will fall."

"As always," Aundra Blacklock said. She turned her yellow eyes skyward toward the low-hanging moon and stars. And caught sight of Tennora leaning over the windowsill. She frowned.

Tennora blinked and jerked awake as her elbow slid out from where it had propped her chin. The statue's face below lay quiet and unmoving, still staring up at the heavens and crusted in bird droppings. Clouds smeared over the sky, dulling the distant moonlight's silver fire. The moon hung much farther along its path than where Tennora had left it. Aundra's sphere floated once more twenty feet above the hand of the God Catcher, which was once more reaching up as if offering the sphere to the moon.

The carved eye stared up at it, rainwater pooling along its lower lid like a rim of tears.

Tennora rubbed her own eyes. What a strange dream. A dream of dreams, she thought, stretching her stiff back. Usually her dreams were all urgent and panicked and plotted like a handful of chapbooks shredded and pasted back together. She woke from them feeling harried and tired more often than not, shreds of the dream clinging to her thoughts like cobwebs. But the dream of Aundra and the God Catcher had left her feeling more ... peculiar, and oddly calm.

She studied the God Catcher's face a moment, wondering if it had been a dream at all.

She sighed and tugged on the roots of her hair—of course it was a dream. The statues had not moved in a century. People would notice if they started talking.

Especially if they started talking about lost paths, children, and vultures. "Fanciful tendencies" was being kind.

"The key is the singer's collar," she said. "The lodestone is the first lord's gift." Wasn't that the way of dreams? To sound portentous and riddling, but in the end mean nothing at all? She'd dreamed hardly a tenday before that her aunt and Master Halnian had been trying to convince her to marry some hideous spider creature, telling her that if she didn't a portal to a plane of mud would open and everyone's garden would be ruined. And that hadn't meant anything, of course, except that she was overworked.

She went back into the sitting room. Even though she'd managed to doze off, she didn't feel tired. Her thoughts kept returning to the cryptic notions of the dream—a puzzle she wanted to piece together, but could not. And then another puzzle—her mother's trunk. She glanced up at Nestrix, still sleeping in the loft.

"To the Hells with it," she said. She stomped, heavy on her heel, into the false bottom. The wood cracked. Nestrix stirred and grumbled, but did not wake.

As she peeled the splintered wood away, the candlelight caught the gleam of gold.

Tennora reached into the false bottom and drew out a long chain, gold with tiny perfect pearls strung on every third link. A trio of pendants hung from it—two intricate cameos of a man and a woman facing a clear, buttery-colored gem ringed by still more pearls. Tennora forgot to breathe a moment. Between the piece's artistry and the fact that the man's profile had a decidedly Adarbrent family nose—long and pointed—it should not have been where it was.

She laid it on the blankets beside her and reached back in. Treasure after treasure came up from the trunk, each one bubbling with pearls. A coronet of hundreds of bright, tiny diamonds with fat pearls on its points. A collar of emeralds dripping a swag of seed pearls. A brooch of cinnabar carved into the shape of a copulating couple—the pearls were very creative there, Tennora thought with a blush. A man's signet ring with an unfamiliar crest—a horse and anchor—old and well worn and banded by flat squares of nacre. A rope of pearls, enough to wrap her neck from skull to collarbone. She pulled all those and more from the trunk and laid them on the blanket.

At the bottom, beneath all the jewels, were three folded pieces of parchment. Tennora opened them, greedy for information.

Watch postings. Three of them, looking for a thief. A very prolific thief with a penchant for pearls.

The date stamped across the latest one had been a tenday before Liferna wed Mesial Hedare.

Her breath stuck in her throat.

There were too many lies in that trunk, too many deceptions that unseated her own life and her own understandings. She couldn't do it.

Blood pounding in Tennora's ears, she folded the sheaf of papers together and put it back in the box followed by all the jewels, the bundles of armor and weapons, the lockpicks, and the tray. She closed the box up and slid it back across the rug to where it had been sitting propping up her feet, and climbed back into her makeshift bed, trying to keep her mind blank and failing.

FOUR

The lint on Rhinzen's robe burned white hot against his eyes like stars against the night. He rubbed his eyes and hoped the redness was fading, even if the headache the morning light gave him was not. The haepthum was still clinging to his senses despite a long and dreamless night.

The students didn't seem to have noticed—which was, Rhinzen thought, both good and bad. Good because it gave them nothing unsavory to report back to the headmaster or their parents. Bad because it had to be obvious that he was riding out *something* even if they couldn't tell what, and so he was clearly tutoring a bunch of nearsighted morons too easily distracted to notice a damned thing. Infants, he thought, looking out over his students.

A score of children were seated at two long tables—humans and half-elves with spindly legs hardly long enough to touch the ground; a trio of dwarves, still downy-cheeked; a single gnome girl who looked like a very ugly doll; half-orc twins that he expected to fail if they'd just stop passing their exams. Each had a book open in front of him or her, and all twenty foreheads were crinkled in concentration. The susurrations of turned pages and mouthed words grated on the wizard's ears.

"*Silent* reading, please," he said. The noise stopped, only to begin again a few breaths later.

Rhinzen sighed. When the quarter ended, he would have fulfilled his obligations and could leave these little fools to the next of the House of Wonder's faculty and go back to

teaching *wizards*. Especially now that he'd released the weakest of that bunch.

Still, as tedious as teaching the children of Waterdeep's wealthy—most of them were too young and too untested to show even an inkling of skill with the Art—could be, it wasn't a poor place to firm up connections. In that class alone, he had a handful of patrons' sons and daughters, and a few who could prove more useful still.

His eyes fell on a rather skinny half-elf boy with brown hair and serious eyes, a young man named Antoum Mrays. Rhinzen was terrible at guessing human ages, but the boy was old enough to have gained his first bit of height and lost the paleness of his curls, but not old enough yet to have started growing in earnest. Nothing special in him as far as the Weave was concerned, but his mother was a woman of significant influence.

Nazra Mrays might have been losing what good looks humans claimed she had, but she still knew how to gain a wealthy merchant or lord's ear and purse strings. She was well known for her gregarious nature, and more than once Rhinzen had watched her make a fool of herself and others at parties only to come out of it with a new confidante, a new investor, and a handful of future friends. Appalling, in Rhinzen's opinion, but useful.

Unlike his drunken, nattering mother, Antoum was blessedly quiet and studious. For a roomful of students as quiet as Antoum Mrays, Rhinzen would give his left hand.

He winced at the inopportune thought and rubbed the back of his hand, as if to rub away the memory of the knife.

"Young Master Mrays," he said. The boy's head shot up, with a guilty look on his face. Another appreciable quality in

a child: shame. "Come here, please."

The boy shuffled to the front of the room. "Yes, Master Halnian?"

Rhinzen smiled as pleasantly as he could. "I wanted to ask how the warding spells I set up for your mother are working out. How does she find them?"

The boy shifted. "Well, master," he said in a light, unbroken voice.

"No trouble at all?" Rhinzen smiled more broadly. "Nothing that needs to be adjusted? Nothing refreshed?"

"No, master. She says they're very fine indeed."

Rhinzen didn't doubt Nazra had said no such thing to her son. But now the boy would mention it, and later, if anything did happen, it would be in her mind. She would remember Master Halnian had expressed concerns, and the blame would fall a little lighter.

"Well, dear boy, do tell your mother that if anything does not please her, she should let me know at once. Such things often require finessing before they work perfectly—and I wish to be certain they work perfectly."

"Yes, master."

"You may take your seat." Antoum made a little bow and took his place at the end of the table once more.

A very pleasant child, Rhinzen thought. His headache was finally fading and the children were scheduled to study their cantrips for another hour yet. It was as good a time as any to puzzle out Ferremo's counterspell. He drew a sheet of

parchment from the sheaf beside him, wet his quill on his tongue, and started the initial calculations.

Whatever the garish assassin and his master were after, it would certainly have to be a great deal of coin to be worth the risks involved. Rhinzen had to admit to himself that his curiosity over Ferremo's mysterious patron drove him mad in the wee hours of the night when the haepthum wouldn't ebb as it once had. A crime lord from Luskan? Or Baldur's Gate? A cleric of some dark and inscrutable god?

There were hints, tantalizing hints. He or she was wealthy, for certain, and Ferremo's master had only entered Waterdeep in the past few days, expecting their plans to be ready—someone who did not want to be in the city. Rhinzen had also seen the way the assassin's face occasionally went ever so slightly slack as they spoke—a sign if Rhinzen had ever seen one that someone was psionically dictating to Ferremo. And their plan, if he had the right of it, was far too complicated for a simple robbery. ...

Insight jolted Rhinzen's thoughts. Avoiding the city, psionic conversations, attempting a seemingly random robbery in a very pointed fashion. Wealthy. Dangerous. Obsessively secretive. The hints started to fall together, led along by the faintest memory of a word in a book in the dusty recesses of his collection—*xorvintaal*.

He cleared his throat and twenty little heads jerked up simultaneously, eyes alert. Rhinzen smiled at their sudden attention.

"Who would like to volunteer," he said, "to bring me a book from the library?"

Goodwoman Blacklock,

An acquaintance of mine seeks audience with you in regards to a matter of some urgency. She is

Tennora tapped the end of the stylus against the table. A dragon? A lunatic? Very rude? She glanced back over her shoulder at Nestrix, perusing Tennora's copy of *The Draconomicon* and making faces at the text. She'd been doing that since the sun had come up, when—after bargaining out loud in her sleep over jewels for a solid quarter hour, she finally bolted awake. When Tennora asked about her dream, she snarled.

It had taken Tennora several hours, but at last she'd managed to fall asleep, arguing with her dead parents in her own thoughts as she did. Awake too early, she was tired and a little edgy.

She is in dire need of your aid, Tennora wrote. Please visit at your earliest convenience. Regards, Tennora Hedare, sixth floor (shoulder). She sprinkled sand over the wet ink, shook it off, and left it to dry a moment.

"Who is that?" Nestrix asked. She pointed her chin at a painting that hung between the door and the corner, a portrait of a woman seated beside a table covered in lilies and vinestars. The woman was slim, with elaborately coiffed hair the color of honey. She wore a peach-colored dress that seemed as if it were made of many layers of spider's silk, and many strands of rosy pearls—all the rage a decade earlier. Her smile, considered alone, was demure, but the look in her eyes made her seem as if she were laughing at the absurdity of the scene.

"My mother," Tennora said. "My, er, dam."

Nestrix considered the painting. "She looks like a thief too."

Tennora pursed her lips and waited a breath before replying, "She was a noblewoman." But she studied the painting, wondering what it was that Nestrix saw in her mother that Tennora had never realized was there. What she'd seen hiding in Tennora.

"A thief in noblewoman's clothing." Nestrix tilted her head. "I suppose that's where you get that look."

"No," Tennora answered.

Looking back in the light of day, there were clues. Her mother had been careful to raise Tennora to survive in her father's family's world. To read their emotions and hide her own. To please them when she could. It became a sort of game, to show one face and hide the other. The Hedares were only a generation past being considered bright-coin interlopers, the ink just drying on their titles. It made them touchy.

She remembered how angry her mother had been when eight-year-old Tennora had shown her how she could make a coin disappear after one of the pantry jacks had shown her some sleight of hand—the beginnings of her love affair with magic. Liferna's face had gone red. She'd demanded to know where Tennora had learned the trick and said it wasn't kind of her to lie to people. Frightened, Tennora had dropped the coin from her sleeve and was in the midst of confessing all, when her father came in from the gardens wanting to know what was happening. Her father had laughed and soothed his wife until she laughed too, but the pantry jack was gone the next day.

Lord Mesial Hedare, a younger son and a decade older than his wife, seemed to have grown tired of those manners and that life. He had always known how to make Liferna laugh, but never how to make her stop worrying that his family was watching.

When Tennora left her aunt and uncle's house, she moved into the God Catcher and, for the first time in her young life, tried to unfasten the tight halter of control she'd put herself into.

And now, she thought, looking up at her mother's portrait, that Liferna's reasons were growing clear,

Tennora knew it had all been for her mother's pride and never for her daughter.

"Well," Nestrix said, "whatever you want to call it, you get your look from your dam. Are we going to find Blacklock now?"

"Yes," Tennora said with a certain sense of relief. She picked up the foolscap. "I wrote a note. My rent is due today, and I'll slip it in with the coins."

Nestrix gave her a dubious look. "That's all? I could do that myself."

"You could not," Tennora said. She opened a drawer in the kitchen and took out the bag she collected her rent in. She slipped the folded note inside and crossed over to the window. Hanging off the window frame—and each window frame along the God Catcher—was a small basket, the perfect size to hold the bag of coins.

"It's easier for her to fly down and get them," Tennora explained. "And that's the best way to get her attention."

Nestrix frowned. "How long will it take?"

"We'll have to wait and see," Tennora said. Aundra was fairly punctual about picking up payments. When she'd deal with the note was another matter—if it was as quickly as she found someone to clean the flue when it needed it, they should hear back by the next morning. Tennora looked up at the sun reflected dully on the slate-colored sphere.

"So until then ... we sit here?" Nestrix said in a tone that clearly said she couldn't think of anything less appealing.

Tennora looked Nestrix over—her hair was greasy and tangled, her shift torn and filthy, her skin dull. And the smell ... suffice it to say, Nestrix did not smell like a summer storm that morning.

"I have a better idea," Tennora said.

The only thing Tennora missed about living in her family's manor—if she were to be brutally honest—was the bathing chamber. There was no room in the God Catcher for such a space, no servants to stoke the fires and carry the water, no way to cloud the room with perfumed steam without her neighbors all smelling it and complaining.

She usually went to the bathhouse a song's walk away. Clean, reputable, and well run—but the Queen of Hearts bathhouse was also terribly public. Not the sort of place to take Nestrix.

Instead, Tennora borrowed a copper tub from her downstairs neighbor, a heartwarder at the temple of Sune. Tennora then went down to the square and whistled at a quartet of children all carrying buckets. She sent them to the fountain and went back upstairs to stir up the hearth.

Nestrix had another book in her lap. She sat with her chin in her hand and scowled at the text.

"This is ridiculous," she said. "They may as well have printed a children's tale."

"What are you looking at?"

Nestrix held up the book, one of Tennora's older, leather-bound tomes, secreted out of her father's library. There was no title on its cover, but she knew it by sight: *A History of Draconic Interactions*. "There is a section on the great game. Have you read it?"

"Probably," Tennora said, adding some chunks of wood to the fire. A chimney grate extended up through the lower apartments, and warm air was wafting up from it, making the coals hot. "But not recently. What's the problem?"

"It makes it sound as if every dragon were a *taaldarax*. And as if *xorvintaal* were a matter of trying to kill one another. What sort of game would it be if you stood to be killed by a bunch of idiotic wyrmlings every time you made a move?"

"Well ... a rather frustrating one, I'd suppose."

"Frustrating and idiotic. There isn't a dragon on Toril stupid enough to play a game like this, which is why most of the things the book says are against the rules. You should tell the writer of this book he's an idiot."

Xorvintaal. Tennora couldn't remember exactly what the book said—only that it claimed that dragons played a sort of game of thrones, trying to outwit one another. The book wasn't the only one that made such a claim; she knew she'd seen mention of the great game elsewhere, and assertions

that the game involved the governments of many nations, the clergy of many gods, and gangs and businesses alike. It seemed a bit far-fetched, she had always thought, and most books on the subject of dragons agreed—they were beasts driven by simple desires.

But then there was Nestrix.

"Did you play this game?" she asked Nestrix.

"It is not to my taste," Nestrix said, dropping her eyes to the book again. "But my dam's sire, Chendarixanath, was quite the *taaldarax*. Very good at what he did. He wanted to bring me under his wing, but I wasn't interested. If I want something, I'd rather take it than have a minion's minion trick some idiot's idiot."

Tennora started to ask what exactly Nestrix's grandfather had been so good at and what *xorvintaal* had to do with minions and idiots, but Nestrix had sunk back into the book and was no longer listening. Tennora rolled her eyes and hurried back downstairs to collect the water.

Tennora hadn't realized how successfully Nestrix's presence had put her lost studies out of her mind, until Cassian came up, as she was paying her little water leaders their copper nibs, and hailed her.

"Coins bright," he said cheerfully. "How are you this fine morning?"

"Cassian!" Tennora said. "Good morning. Well met."

He regarded the four buckets with a smile. "Thirsty?"

Tennora laughed because he had meant it as a joke, but not because it was funny. "Oh. No, no. I have ... a guest.

She's been traveling a bit, and now she's in desperate need of a soak."

"Ah. Do you want a hand with these? You can't possibly carry all four yourself." "Yes! That would be wonderful. Thank you." She bent, picked up two buckets, and nudged the door open with her foot. "I was a little worried someone might take them," she lied.

"Always a concern," he said with a pleasant smile. "I didn't see you last night. Did you go home early?"

Tennora's heart sank like a bag of sand. "Yes. That is ... Master Halnian decided to discontinue my arrangement."

She heard Cassian come to a stop on the stairs behind her. "Oh," he said. "Oh Tennora, I'm so sorry. Permanently?"

Tennora felt a lump form in her throat. She took a deep breath, but it wouldn't fade. "Unless something changes," she managed, and continued up the stairs.

Nestrix didn't look up as they entered. Tennora set her buckets down in the kitchen and Cassian did the same.

"Nestrix?" Tennora said. "This is a"—she caught herself before she said classmate—"friend of mine,

Cassiari Laforinari. Cassian, this is Nestrix."

Nestrix looked up and speared Cassian with her sapphire gaze. Cassian hesitated, then held out a hand. Nestrix recoiled slightly at the proffered greeting.

Tennora cleared her throat. "She's just settling in. The, um, trip here was rather trying."

"Oh," Cassian said. "Well met. Where have you come to us from?"

Nestrix frowned. "The Calim."

"Almraiven," Tennora added hastily, naming the only human bastion in the Calim. "She came from Almraiven. With a caravan." For a moment Tennora was afraid Nestrix would disagree, but the confusion in the glance she gave Tennora fled. A slow smile curved over her lips.

"Yes," she said, looking back up at Cassian. "A very long, dusty trip. You'll excuse me. I'm tired." "Of course," Cassian said, sounding confused himself. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance." He turned to Tennora. "Do take care of yourself."

"Certainly," she said. She thanked Cassian again and managed to handle herself a little more graciously than usual when he suggested she come along with some of the other apprentices for evenfeast.

"It sounds most entertaining," she said, escorting him out the door. "I'll consider it." He smiled at her, and she melted a little.

When she turned back to the room, Nestrix was smirking at her.

"You lied much better that time," she said. "Is that one your mate?"

"No," Tennora snapped. She heaved one of the buckets over to the iron pot that hung over the fire. "He's just a friend."

"Your smell says otherwise. You may be a *dokaal*, but the smell of a creature interested in—" "You know, I don't believe that is any of your concern," Tennora said, continuing to pour the water in.

Nestrix stood and crossed over to the table. "Ah! I see. He doesn't *want* to mate with you."

"That isn't—"

"It's for the best, you know," Nestrix continued. "You could do far better. He's a poor specimen. You could beat him to a bloody pulp if you weren't careful." She looked back at the door. "And he probably wouldn't even notice."

Tennora slammed the bucket down on the table. "Shut up."

Nestrix looked startled. "What?"

"You are *not* going to sit here and insult my friends, my romantic life, or the way I lie, you understand?" Tennora added the last of the buckets. "And if you don't like it, you can find someone else to put up with you."

She expected to be hit with another tantrum of dragonfear, but instead she found Nestrix regarding her curiously.

"You're very strange, *dokaal*," Nestrix said. "Everything I said was true—and a compliment besides—and yet you act angry. Except you clearly mean none of what you say. You won't turn me out. You like me."

"Where the Hells do you get that impression?" Tennora fumed.

Nestrix smiled, again with that peculiar fragility. "I've been hated by plenty. You don't hate me. And—lucky you—I'm growing rather fond of you. If I did play *xorvintaal* like that book says I must, you could be my *lovac*, that's how well I like you."

Tennora found herself too annoyed to leap on the information, and she folded her arms across her chest and looked away, shaking her head at the fireplace. "Bring those buckets back down to the door and have the water leaders fill them up again."

When the water started to boil, Tennora enlisted Nestrix's help in lifting the heavy cauldron and dumping it into the copper bath along with the cooler water from the children's second delivery.

"What are you making?" Nestrix asked. "Soup?"

"You're going to have a bath," Tennora said.

"In hot water?" Nestrix said dubiously. "I don't think so."

"You'll like it more than you expect, I promise. Get in."

Nestrix shook her head. "Why should I?"

"Because you smell terrible and these are small quarters," Tennora said. "Get out of that shift and get in the tub. We'll all be happier for it."

Nestrix glowered at her for a moment, as if she were daring Tennora to force her. Then she sighed and rolled her eyes. She stripped off the shift with hardly a moment's modesty. Tennora averted her eyes, but couldn't help but notice a scar wide as her thumb that wrapped around her rib cage from the middle of her back to the top of her hip bone.

"Oh my," she said. "What happened to you?"

Nestrix looked down at the scar. "The shell is what I have left of my clutch. That is what I have left of my mate."

"He cut you? With what?"

Nestrix rolled her eyes. "It's a mating scar, *dokaal*. His claws."

Tennora blushed. "Oh. I ... How very interesting. Different customs ... so often are."

"If he didn't prove he was strong," Nestrix said, "I would have had no interest in him. You should have seen the scars I left on him. How long do you expect me to sit in this stewpot?"

"Until you're clean." Tennora held out a cake of rose-scented soap and a rag. "Skin, hair, face."

Nestrix looked at the proffered items. "With that?"

"Yes." Tennora rubbed the soap into the rag and shoved it into Nestrix's hands. "When is the last time you bathed?"

Nestrix made a face at her. "It *rained* yesterday." She rubbed the rag gingerly against her arm. Tennora took it from her and dunked it into the water.

"Look, I understand you're"—*new* wasn't the right word —"*unaccustomed* to being a human, but for Sune's bright face, you have got to put a little effort into your hygiene. You're going to have to bathe. You're certainly going to have to replace your clothes and wash what you get. And comb your hair. And get some shoes."

"Why?" Nestrix said blankly.

Because people expect it of you, and you expect it of others—Tennora caught herself before she said it, words straight from her mother's mouth.

"Because if you don't, you are going to have a rather hard time of it in Waterdeep. People won't treat you as well if you look like a beggar and smell like a rubbish heap."

"I don't care," Nestrix said, though she started scrubbing her skin as she said it. "I'll have to leave after Blacklock fixes me anyway. Then I can go bathe properly: sand and ocean water." She smiled at her knees. "The salt dries and polishes your scales when you brush it off."

"In the meantime, then," Tennora said. "And clean your hair."

The shift Nestrix had worn was in such terrible shape that Tennora doubted it could survive a washing and come out the other side in one piece. She was a good head shorter than the dragon, but perhaps she had a skirt and blouse that she could part with, at least until Aundra had her say.

Not for the first time in the last day, Tennora wondered what the Hells she had gotten herself into. But—also not for the first time—the thought of the ritual Nestrix had promised soothed her concerns.

She closed her eyes and imagined how focused she would become, how the Weave would flow through her, how surprised Master Halnian would be. Perhaps he would promote her on to her own studies, so she could read spellbooks at her leisure.

And no one would convince her to be an idle noblewoman or confuse her with a thief.

She sorted through her things and found some clean smallclothes, the loose dress and tunic she'd been wearing the day before, and stockings. Boots would be a problem, she thought, looking over as Nestrix rubbed soap between the toes of her rather large and rough foot. It would have to wait until later.

She folded the clothes neatly on the kitchen table, and noticed the pocket of the skirt held something. A folded piece of paper—she couldn't recall where she'd picked it up for a moment.

Then she remembered the half-orc in the stormcloak from Mardin's, the one who seemed keen to warn her of a coming storm or some such nonsense. She sighed again and unfolded the leaflet, wondering which god or exarch he was so keen to sell.

And found a fair likeness of Nestrix looking back at her.

Crimes, the leaflet read, murder of Ardusk Nagaenil, a wizard of Cormyr; theft, burglary, fraud.

The blood drained from Tennora's face. She set the skirt on the table, still staring at the leaflet.

"Why are you making that face?" Nestrix said. "What's wrong?"

Tennora looked up. "You're wanted for murder."

"Oh," Nestrix said, returning to scrubbing the soap into her hair.

"Did you really kill this man?"

"Yes," Nestrix said blithely. She paused a moment. "Wait, who does it say I killed?"

Tennora wet her lips. "A wizard of Cormyr. His name was Ardusk Nagaenil."

"Oh him. Yes, then." She went back to scrubbing her hair. "Most definitely."

A horrible feeling writhed in Tennora's stomach. "You had to ask who. How many have you killed?"

"Ever?"

"Ever."

Nestrix gave a jerky shrug. "I don't know. It seems vulgar to keep a count."

Tennora fell backward into the chair beside the table. Her ears felt curiously numb and her head felt loose. Nestrix looked her over.

"Are you all right?"

"No," Tennora managed. "You're a murderer."

"You are getting upset over nothing. I am allowed to defend myself."

"No! Not so many times that you can't remember!"

Nestrix gave her a confused look. "I don't know what you're so upset about this time either. You *knew* I was a dragon. I'm more prone than most to ... defending myself." She smiled wickedly and ducked her head under to rinse the

soap from her hair. "Anyway, *that* one was after I was changed. I asked him for help, and he tried to take advantage of me. First as a mate, then as a ... how did he put it? An object of interest—he wanted to throw spells at me and see what happened. So I knocked him over, took one of his retorts, smashed it on the table, and cut his throat with the glass. What was I supposed to do?"

"Leave!" Tennora spluttered. "Disarm him and get out!"

Nestrix made a face. "That seems like the same amount of effort."

"It's not about effort!"

Nestrix shrugged again. "Well, no use wringing your hands over it. He's dead and that's that. They should be happy. He was disgusting." She looked up at Tennora and her eyes took on the faint glow they had before. "Are you thinking of turning me over to someone?" she said sweetly—too sweetly. It made Tennora's blood curdle.

"I never said that."

"You could," she said. "Does that one say I'm mad?"

It did. Just under the listing of the crimes. *Spellscarred. Afflicted with madness and delusions. Do not approach alone.* She's not a dragon, it said between the lines. She's simply insane.

Nestrix was staring up at her, but the glow had faded. "You could," she said again, but there was no threat there. "If they catch you helping me, I don't think it will go well for you. Not at all."

Tennora scrambled for something to say, but her mind was occupied with thoughts of escape. She could run, now—while Nestrix was naked and wet—and what could Nestrix do? She could wait until Nestrix went to sleep, or slip out on any number of errands. She could find the Watch and tell them everything, or track down the half-orc in the cloak and give him the key to her apartment. She could stop everything. She should.

But she wasn't sure she would.

Nestrix raised her eyebrows. "Do you think I'm mad?"

"Not a bit," Tennora said, lightly as she could. "Are you?"

"A little," Nestrix admitted. "A century is a long time to be a *dokaal*. Are you going to turn me in?"

Tennora watched her for a long moment and then shook her head. She still wanted that ritual. She still wanted Nestrix to be real.

"Good," Nestrix said. She stood, water sluicing off her smooth body. "I believe I smell like the soap now. What am I supposed to do about the wet?"

FIVE

Night fell and grew deep before Aundra Blacklock's reply came. Seated on the floor, Nestrix was once again reading a book—this one a history of Aglarond—and periodically making noises of derision at what she found. Tennora, no longer required to finish her studies at night, found herself at loose ends. She eventually settled on a chair behind Nestrix and occupied her hands with teasing out the knots that years had matted into the dark tresses.

The bath and fresh clothes had certainly done Nestrix a favor—as had tearing her old shift into rags. The faint smell of lightning overlaid by roses wafted through the room, and her dusky skin was even and smooth. She was not pretty in a conventional sense, but Tennora knew if Nestrix were to walk into a crowded hall some brightstarfeast, dressed in something that fit, a great number of eyes would be on her.

Provided this hair comes unsnarled, she thought, tugging at a particularly stubborn knot. Nestrix grunted, but didn't seem to mind the pain overmuch.

Tennora could remember being a little girl, her maid brushing out her blonde curls to many tears and much wailing. She remembered her mother coming into the nursery, her dark eyes stern. She sent the maid out, wiped Tennora's tears, and gently brushed the rest out herself.

"Better not to show them what hurts you," she said softly, and young as she was, Tennora had detected a note of disappointment that she was certain was for her.

The beat of wings outside the window interrupted the memories and presaged the shutters' opening. Nestrix surged to her feet and stepped incautiously before the aperture.

Aundra Blacklock folded her wings close to her body and stepped in through the window. She was nearly as tall as Nestrix, with legs like stone columns and slim arms. Her olive skin faded in to bone white feathers at the edge of her scalp, mirroring the feathers of her enormous wings. The eyes that regarded first Nestrix then Tennora were cold and yellow, and the talons of her toes clicked against the floor as she approached.

Aundra stretched her neck out like a hawk spotting movement in a field, and bobbed twice before dropping her head in a strange mimicry of a bow.

Nestrix stood as if entranced, standing before the raptoran. Bathed in the moonlight, the pair looked like nothing so much as a suppliant standing before the messenger of the gods.

"You are Blacklock?" she said softly.

Aundra sucked her teeth for a moment, her piercing eyes locked on Tennora. This is how a vole feels, Tennora thought. Bits of her dream floated up before her mind's eye. *Tell me what you dream.*

"Indeed," Aundra said. "You want my assistance."

"I *need* your assistance," Nestrix said. "I am ... plaguechanged. My body—"

"I know who you are, Clytemorrenestrix," Aundra said, looking around the apartment. She stretched her left wing,

the primaries brushing the spines of Tennora's books. "Now ask. Beg."

Nestrix balled her fists, and Tennora felt the dragonfear rushing up like a glutted spring. Her heart started to race.

Aundra stood perfectly still, wing outstretched, and tilted her head curiously.

"Is *that* how you ask me?" she said, though there was no malice in the question. And no fear. Nestrix closed her eyes and turned away.

"I wish to have my true form restored," she said. "Please. I've heard you can repair what the Blue Fire wrought." She looked back at Aundra. "Repair me. I've looked for so long to find a way."

"I know what you've done to get here," Aundra said. "I know what you've done to those whose help you've asked for. Why should I join them?"

Was it the moonlight, or did Nestrix turn paler at that? Tennora wondered. She thought of the pamphlet folded into her apron, of the man in the hood who tried to warn her. Of Nestrix, her chin high, saying, *I am allowed to defend myself.*

"We have all sinned," Nestrix said.

"Then why you?"

"Because ..." Nestrix's voice broke, and she took a moment to regain her composure. "You are not a cruel woman. I am lost. I am nothing in this form. Every morning I wake and I wish I were dead. What holds me together ...

what keeps me from dying is the knowledge that someone—*you*, Blacklock—can save me."

Aundra abruptly folded her wings together again and crossed her arms over her chest, the thick clawlike nails draped over her arm. "A pretty answer, dragon." She turned to Tennora. "And what is your role in this, girl?"

Tennora folded her hands around her knees. "She asked for my help."

"And that's all?"

Tennora shrugged. What else could she say? *My world's coming apart... I don't know who I am ... I don't know who she is.*

"She needed me," she said. "But she agreed to help me in return."

"A ritual," Nestrix interjected. "One she can't find in her books."

Aundra bobbed her head and sucked her teeth again, considering a spot on the wall.

Is the child the plaguechanged one?

It is. And it is not.

Tennora shook her head, as if it could clear her thoughts. Aundra turned back to Nestrix. "You must prove you're serious. This is no cantrip you're asking me for."

"I am," Nestrix said. "Anything you ask, I'll do it." "You will go to a shop for me then," the raptoran said. "The antiquary's shop on Jembril Street. In the back room you will

find a case that contains a mask made of golden feathers. Bring that to me."

"You want us to purchase it?" Tennora asked.

"The shopkeeper will not part with it willingly, but it isn't his to sell. You will have to find a way to get it to me." She smiled, an expression that was out of place on Aundra Blacklock's face. "Do that, and I'll gladly aid you."

Tennora stood. "I don't think—"

"It's as good as done," Nestrix said.

"Perfect," Aundra said. "Bring it to me two days hence." And with that, the sorceress vanished.

Both women fell back a step—it had been so sudden, so noiseless. Tennora felt a shiver run down her spine. What she wouldn't give for magic like that.

Including stealing from someone? Tennora thought. She pursed her lips.

"We have to go," Nestrix said softly. Her eyes were damp with sudden tears. "Come on. While it's dark." She turned to the door.

Tennora caught her arm. "No. We can't—"

Nestrix twisted away from her. "Gods damn you, *dokaal*, we go now!"

"Listen! We aren't just plucking an apple off a tree. You need tools—lockpicks and things—to break into a shop. You need a plan."

The look in Nestrix's eyes said clearly that if Tennora didn't do something she'd tear through the city, break down the door to the shop, and—likely—be taken down by a quiverful of the Watch's arrows for her troubles.

"We need a plan," Tennora said, and Nestrix's dire expression softened. "And some tools."

Rhinzen Halnian looked at himself in the looking glass, at his high cheekbones, straight nose, and turquoise eyes. Hale, hearty, and still handsome as Corellon. He dripped a line of juniper-scented oil on his comb and ran it through his long blond hair, securing it in a queue at the base of his neck.

He hummed a little tune to himself. Normally, he hated attending brightstarfeasts like the one he was preparing for—plenty of nobles showing off their copious wealth and lacking intellect. He only ever bothered in the hopes of making a good impression on the sort of people who sent their children to the House of Wonder or who wanted to purchase his services. Maintaining the appearance in polite company of one who deserved the finer things meant his services could attain the prices they deserved.

He smoothed a little of the juniper oil over his eyebrows as well. A pair of perfectly round sapphire earrings and a solid platinum chain with a matching charm shaped like an acorn hanging from it—perfect. The very picture of a wise and wealthy scholar.

He straightened his belt and turned—

To find Ferremo Magli in all his gaudy glory watching him from beside the fire.

Rhinzen nearly jumped out of his skin. "Gods and devils! Why are you always doing that?"

Ferremo shrugged and gave the wizard an insolent smile. "Not my fault you're not listening, Master Halnian. I'm here for the instructions."

Rhinzen scowled coldly at the assassin and spent a few more minutes adjusting his attire. Gutter-bred, bright-coin thief, he thought, watching Ferremo's reflection in the looking glass start to fidget.

Once he was satisfied that Ferremo was annoyed, Rhinzen turned and sat down at his desk. He pulled out a drawer and pressed the panel hidden there. A latch popped. From beneath the desktop, he withdrew a sheaf of papers.

"Here," he said. "You'll need components."

"I'm well aware of how—"

"No, you aren't," Rhinzen said, crossing back to his looking glass. "You didn't buy my time to gather some student's work. It's a complex and detailed spell. That ritual is specifically designed to break the wards you want and only the wards you want. Anything else would be too risky." He opened a small box and plucked a trio of rings from its seemingly empty interior. He admired them as he slid them over his tapered fingers. "You need components: quite a lot of residuum, salts of copper and lead, an astral diamond, and a flask containing the blood of a gold dragon."

Ferremo nodded, even at the last one. Rhinzen's displeasure must have shown, for the assassin chuckled.

"You underestimate my master's means. Worry not; this is exactly what we required." From his vest, Ferremo

withdrew a small pouch and handed it to the wizard.

Rhinzen opened it and poured fourteen platinum suns, feather-light and gleaming, into his palm. "And this is what I required," he said, sliding the coins into the secret compartment.

"Don't spend it all in one place, dreamkisser," Ferremo said as he headed toward the window. "A pleasure doing business with you."

"A pleasure indeed," answered Rhinzen. In an offhanded way, he added, "How is your master handling the city? I understand it's most uncomfortable for his kind."

Ferremo froze. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Dear boy, are you slow as well as tacky?" Rhinzen said mildly. "It means I know who your patron is."

"I haven't kept it from you."

"The important bits, *lovac*." Ferremo scowled. Rhinzen added, "And, more importantly, I believe I've worked out what it is you're planning on doing. This isn't about coin."

"Who ever said it was?"

"You certainly implied it," Rhinzen said, slipping his overcloak on. "But what you want is priceless, isn't it?"

Ferremo didn't answer, his head down, still studying the directions.

"You'll never get it out," Rhinzen said. "There will be wards besides mine. Ahghairon's—"

"We aren't planning to get it out," Ferremo said. "She isn't going to give it up, that much is true. So we'll have to take something she'll trade for it."

Rhinzen started to say that was a fool's errand—he was talking about one of the most valuable items in Waterdeep and one of the shrewdest women. There wasn't a device, weapon, gem, or spell that would make such a trade happen.

Then he remembered. There was one thing that was more valuable to Nazra Mrays. More valuable by far. For the first time since the dragon's assassin had shown up asking for information on Sea Ward homes, Rhinzen's heart fell.

It is too late for this, he thought. You have the coin. You earned the coin. The boy is none of your concern.

It did not quell the guilt.

The *lovac's* copper teeth glinted in the warm light. "You'll keep your mouth shut, Master Halnian. Lest you want your shiny name dragged through the muck."

There was a knock at the door. Ferremo's whole being tensed. Rhinzen waved his concerns away. "One of my apprentices," he said. "Come in."

The door opened to admit a young man with brown hair and pleasant, regular features—Cassian Laforan.

"Master Halnian? Your carriage is ready. And Master Kellan is waiting."

Rhinzen smiled politely and fought the urge to send Cassian back downstairs with the message that Master Kellan could wait until Mystra came back, he didn't care. But

he'd agreed to share a carriage with the halfling wizard to the evenfeast.

"Very well, tell him I'll be down in a moment. While I'm gone, I want you and Jihar to catalog the alchemical salts—make certain we have enough of the copper, in particular. Have someone rework the enchantments on the lights in the entry; they're going dim. And please remind Tennora to clean up the library before she goes home."

Cassian cleared his throat. "Um, sir, you let Tennora go."

Had he? Godsdamnit, Rhinzen thought. He had to cut back on the haepthum—as invigorating as it could be, he couldn't be caught with it. "Well then, I suspect the library is already in fine shape. Run along."

As Cassian left, Rhinzen turned back to Ferremo, who Cassian hadn't even noticed standing in the shadows. This time he chalked it up to the assassin's skill rather than his apprentice's inobservance.

"Ferremo?" Rhinzen said. "Do be gentle with him."

The assassin tipped his head. "Until next time, Master Halnian."

SIX

The next morning, the sun broke through the clouds long enough to give the people of Waterdeep a little hope of a pleasant day. Puddles of rainwater still pooled in the low spots of the cobbles and the patches of missing pavers. A scrap of fog clung to the God Catcher's shoulder, but it was rapidly burning off. The handful of people coming and going across the street of the God Catcher still wore their stormcloaks, in case the clouds changed their minds.

Tennora had spent the early hours of the morning attempting to open the lock of her door with the set of rusty picks from the bottom of her mother's trunk, while Nestrix leaned over her shoulder.

"You're doing it wrong," she said, as Tennora managed to snap three of the picks off in the lock. "I thought you said you were a thief."

"No," Tennora said. "*You* said I was a thief. *I'm* about to say I'm not going to help you anymore if you don't sit down." She sighed and examined the lock. "This isn't working—the picks are all corroded. We need fresh ones."

There were probably plenty of people in Waterdeep who could tell Tennora where the best place to buy lockpicks was. She only knew one—Mardin.

And just because he could didn't mean he would. Not for the first time, Tennora thought about plunging into the seedier areas of Waterdeep herself and ferreting out the sort of shop that would sell her lockpicks. Whether that would be better or worse than the lecture she was risking from Mardin

... She paced a little bit before the door—rehearsing what she was going to say, how she was going to say it.

Nestrix would not have made things easier—she was as like to threaten Mardin as anything. Even if she were silent as a tomb, her presence would make Mardin overreact. Tennora told her to wait in the apartment and handed her a new stack of books to read, before heading out to Mardin's hearth-house.

Mardin was sitting at a table in front of the hearth-house's fire, his ledgers spread open in front of him when Tennora came in. She shut the door gently behind her.

"How the trembling Hells do we go through so much bacon?" he muttered to himself.

"Mardin?"

He looked up, and a smile broke over his face. "Good morning, petal. Looking for a slake? I can have Han fry up something." He started to stand. "Or lessons? Had we planned on you practicing? Let me get—"

"No, no. Nothing like that." She sat in the seat opposite him.

His smile fell into a worried frown. "What is it? Your aunt giving you grief? That brightbird of yours get you into trouble?"

Tennora sighed. "Mardin, I don't have a lover. And no, I'm not 'in trouble,' whatever you mean by that."

"All right, all right. Just making sure your sails are straight. Just seemed like maybe you and that fellow passing notes ..." He raised his eyebrows.

Tennora frowned. "What fellow?"

"Nice half-orc. Wore a cloak. In here the other night, asking if I knew where you lived." Mardin put his quill back in the inkpot. "Figured you'd broken his heart and he was looking to beg you to fix it up. I don't judge if it makes you happy, petal." He gave her a particularly avuncular look. "You could do a lot worse."

Tennora sighed. Mardin was trying to protect her, she knew. But how was nagging her about finding a beau any different than Aunt Aowena nagging her about paying attention to her friends' sons in hopes she'd wed one? And she hoped she could do better than a strange half-orc. ...

"Wait," she said. "On the fifth? After I left?"

"Yes. Said he was worried about you."

The one who'd given her the leaflet. The one who had warned her about Nestrix.

"That wasn't a love note. Have you seen him around since then?"

"Neither hide nor hair," Mardin said. "You want me to keep an eye out for him?"

"Please. And don't let him tell you he knows me."

Mardin's eyes twinkled darkly, reminding Tennora he'd once been a bit of a tough in his younger days. She wondered if she asked him just exactly how he'd known her mother, he would tell her tales not of escaping monsters in the wilds but of second-story jobs and outsmarting guards.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?" he said.

"I ... I'm a little short of coin," she said. "I need—"

"How much do you need?"

"No," she said. "I don't want to borrow anything. I need to sell some things. Some of my mother's things."

Mardin frowned. "Don't know if I can help you get rid of fancy dresses. Maybe some jewels, but you should take those someplace up north. You'll get a better price."

"Not *those* sorts of things," Tennora said significantly. "I have a trunk of hers. An ... old trunk. It's ..." She cleared her throat to banish the lump forming in it, and looked away from Mardin. "That is, they're what you would call specialty items, and I think you know what that means."

Mardin leaned away from the table, his eyes suddenly wary. "Oh. That."

"Yes," she said tightly. "What is it in the box?"

"Her leathers. Her dagger. Lockpicks. Some jewelry. Gloves, boots."

Mardin scratched the back of his neck. "Well then. That's different." He cleared his own throat. "Didn't know she held on to those things. I ... Well, it's a surprise, isn't it? Or did you ...?" "I didn't know," she said. She looked away again. "I don't want to sell all of it," she said. "But ... a few things need to find a ... specialty shop. Do you know where I should take them?"

"Bring them to me," Mardin said. "You won't know how to bargain with that sort. Your aunt wouldn't like it."

"I don't much care what Aunt Aowena likes or not at this stage."

"You'll get arrested if you're selling ... certain goods. No."

"I'm not trying to *fence* anything," Tennora said. "Just the ... tools."

"You'll never get much for them."

"Let me try," Tennora said. "After all, I can't borrow coin from people for the rest of my life. When it doesn't work, you can say you told me so and loan me the coin, but I want those things out of my house. I don't want to live with her lies."

The sounds of Han, the cook, working up the highsunfeast—pots banging, dishes clattering, fat sizzling—floated into the dining room as Mardin stared at Tennora, saying not a word.

"I know—" Tennora said.

"Listen to me, petal," Mardin said, his voice stern. "I know your mother kept these things from you, and you're fair angry right now. And that's how it's going to be—I won't take that from you. But you have to know she didn't tell you because she loved you. She was protecting you. And not just from those nosy gulls Mesial was stuck with. There's a damned good reason I'm retired, and a damned better reason your mother gave it up. You don't even want to think about heading into that world. Understand?"

"I wasn't intending to," Tennora said, subdued.

"Good. All right then"—Mardin put his spectacles back on and leaned over the desk—"the name of the best shop for

you to go to is—"

"Wait. I thought you said I shouldn't even think about it." "I did," Mardin said. "I also know you're a bright and stubborn young lady. You want to know, you'll find a way. Better I give you the name of somebody you can trust." He tore the edge of one of his ledger pages and scribbled the name and address of the shop on it. He passed the slip to Tennora.

"You tell old Fladnor I sent you," he said, gesturing with the quill. "First thing you tell him when you walk in. Keep your hand on your coin purse. And don't go wandering around down in the Dock Ward."

She started out the door when he called to her again.

"Tennora."

She looked back over her shoulder at him, watching her with a worried expression.

"When you get tired of being angry, remember your mother was a person too, and we all make mistakes."

"I'm not angry," Tennora said, the lie tasting foul in her mouth.

"Petal," Mardin said. "Stop."

"I'm not," Tennora said with a smile that felt as if it would shatter at any moment. "You're right. We all make mistakes." She turned and headed out the door before he could break her resolve.

Of all the things that Nestrix hated about her new life, boredom was the very worst. Bored dragons had all manner of remedies at their disposal—hunting, flying, swimming, counting treasure, terrorizing caravans. ... And it took a good long time to get properly bored. Years even.

She shut the book Tennora had left her. Another tome that made spurious claims about the culture of dragons. At least it had understood that *xorvintaal* was a complicated game that humans couldn't hope to grasp—much closer to the truth. But gods above, who had taught the author about denning?

The open window let in the sun, the crisp air of midmorning, and the voices of people on the square below greeting one other and chattering like a flock of geese. Faraway bells were chiming the hours. Nestrix didn't understand the point of that—why let people know an hour had past? It was only an hour.

Even after so long, Nestrix felt as if all she did was ask questions.

Tennora had said not to leave, had said to wait for her to come back. The apartment felt cramped and unfriendly.

And waiting for Tennora, all Nestrix wanted was to go out into the fresh air.

Why should she listen to a half-grown *dokaal* anyway? What was Tennora going to do if Nestrix did go out? And why shouldn't she do what she wanted?

"You stand out," Tennora had said. "People will take notice of you, and you don't want that."

Nestrix had to agree—she didn't want people calling the Watch on her again. While it had been amusing to taunt the Watch captain, and even amusing to fight off the men and women he'd sent to subdue her, she had a plan now. She didn't have the frustration to channel away.

But she had better clothes now—Tennora's skirt and blouse and the other skirt that went over the top of the first. What had she called it?

"Apron," Nestrix said aloud, savoring the sound of the unfamiliar word.

She felt suddenly dizzy, as a series of images—more of the aprons, hanging from a string tied between a house and a scraggly palm, and a girl with dark hair running between them and the sun so bright and hot that she didn't want to leave the shade of the house—overlaid her thoughts. She gripped the arm of the chair, her pulse racing. Her mind unfolded the remembered scent of linen and the attar of roses.

Then, as suddenly as it flared up, it receded and lay quiet in her mind, waiting for her to call on it.

Nestrix ignored it with a ferocity born of many such intrusions.

The first time the memories had erupted had been so long before, Nestrix couldn't recall when it was or where she'd been. Just that, out of nothing, she was recalling a man waving at her from the driver's seat of a wagon with a bright red cover.

They came and went, while she slept and sometimes while she was awake, as if some other person's thoughts poured into her ears and flooded her dreams. Sometimes she

saw herself, blue-scaled and sharp-toothed. Sometimes she saw herself as a blonde-haired woman with a vulpine face and a gap in her teeth. Sometimes the woman was black-haired with an aquiline nose and eyes like a summer sky.

Sometimes the little dark-haired girl was there, tugging on Nestrix's wing or skirts and sometimes she was a blue wyrmling. Sometimes there was treasure. Sometimes there were people she felt she knew or places she could have sworn she'd been. The memories poured into her head without reason, without end.

She didn't want them.

And after the memory's intrusion, she didn't want to be in the apartment either. She still had no shoes. Tennora's feet were far smaller than Nestrix's, and nothing she offered would fit. Nestrix ran a hand over her heavily callused soles. She'd wrapped her feet in rags for so many years that she couldn't remember when the last bunch had rotted away and she hadn't bothered to replace them. Tennora's boots looked much sturdier.

After she'd changed, Nestrix's feet were always tender, always getting cut. Shoes would have helped—what poor work the gods had done when they created the *dokaal*! It would have been better to make the feet with the shoes a part of them—or rough from the start, as hers had become.

She wiggled her toes and thought about how much better they would look when they were claws again.

Still ...

If she was going to do things right, it would be best if she looked like a human—and humans here wore shoes. They couldn't possibly cost very much—not if everyone

needed shoes. And how amusing would it be to hang a pair of boots in her hoard and tell the story of how she had been a human for a time?

Nestrix stood, decision made. She remembered a busy cluster of tents and people not too far away, in the shade of several old and beautiful towers. The *dokaal* in those shops had been keen to sell her all manner of things—perfumes and attars, silks and brocades, oranges, clay bowls, pipeweed. One of them must sell boots. She strode out the door, weighing her coin purse. Not much—only a few score gold pieces and the rest silver. Remembering the beautiful piles of coins she'd once had, Nestrix sighed, tucked the pouch back under Tennora's blouse, and headed for the marketplace.

The shop had no sign except for the shape of a raven burned into the door, no number, and only a narrow, dirty window to display its wares. Tennora looked at the slip and back up at the building. It had to be the place.

Even though it was the middle of the day, there was something so dank, so oppressive about the street that Tennora couldn't help but think it was much later, late enough that she should be home and in bed.

She shook those thoughts away. She needed to do this.

For who? A little voice demanded. For a woman she hardly knew?

In a sense, yes, but the woman wasn't Nestrix. Because, as Tennora started to realize, standing in front of the dingy little shop that insisted it was number thirteen, Dust Alley, it had quite a lot more to do with her mother.

If Mardin knew this shop, her mother knew this shop. If Mardin knew the owner, the owner had probably known Liferna. The real Liferna.

As soon as she'd turned onto Snail Street and into the Dock Ward, she'd caught herself imagining going into the shop, seeing the old man behind the counter, and before she could even say what she wanted, hearing him gasp and declare, "You look exactly like your mother." It was silly, and it made her aunt and uncle's protests ring even louder in her mind.

But she wanted it more than she could have imagined when she'd realized this Fladnor might know Liferna after all.

"Looking to get yourself robbed?" a voice drawled.

Tennora spun around and saw she was being watched by two women dressed in bright, flounced skirts pocked with bows and bits of lace—and in low-cut blouses. They wore paint on their faces, their lush lips like opening roses, their eyes like coals. A pair of highcoin lasses loitering before a tenement, they seemed like they were her own age, but their eyes looked infinitely older.

Tennora put her hand on her coin purse to make certain it was still there, and the prostitutes laughed.

"Poor girl," the one in the red skirt said. "Poor dumb girl."

"Sovann's gonna have a full time with you," the other said.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Tennora said acidly.

The woman chuckled. "You'll have to find out for yourself. Just don't let your guard down. He's a tricky one."

"I don't intend to," Tennora said. She drew herself up very straight, turned on her heel, and headed into the shop she'd been eyeing.

Inside, shelves lined every wall of the shop, stretching all the way to the ceiling. The beams were at least three times Tennora's height above her. The shelves dripped with all manner of wares: glossy weapons, books, glass bottles, yellow candles, gloves, and paper-wrapped sweets. Her gaze traveled down to the counter.

And to the four young men and a woman who were watching her traverse the shop. Their eyes were not friendly, least of all the young man standing behind the counter, sipping from a mug. He—like all of them—wore simple, form-fitting clothes and had an air about him that made Tennora think he would be perfectly at home crouching on a rooftop somewhere. He regarded her with a lazy interest, as if he hadn't decided whether she was worth his attention.

Calm, she told herself. Stay calm. Aowena could cow a clerk; well, then so could Tennora. If Liferna could buy lockpicks, then so would she.

"Well met. I'm looking for Fladnor," she said. "Mardin Eftnacost sent me."

The young man behind the counter looked her up and down, his focus on her sharpening even if his manner still seemed easy. "Fladnor's retired," he said after a moment. "And I don't know your Mardin."

She looked him over in return, the way her aunt would a shop-girl. "Well, then you will have to do."

The young man raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?" His cronies sniggered. One rat-faced man leered at her. Tennora felt her cheeks flushing.

"I expect you're Sovann, then," she said. "I was warned about you. Do you suppose we could do this civilly?"

Sovann smiled. "Should have listened, duchess. Go home. I've got nothing to sell you."

"I need lockpicks." She unrolled the package that contained her mother's set. "These are rusting. I've already broken several."

Sovann frowned at the set. "Lockpicks," he said thoughtfully. "No, I don't think I've ever *heard* of such a thing. How about you, Gargo?"

"Never in my life," the rat-faced man said with a look of mock astonishment.

"Hmm. Lucira? You?"

A slim brunette lounging against the wall shook her head. "Not I."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you," Sovann said, all innocence. "Can't sell you something I never heard of."

"Clever. I've never heard an ass talk, let alone spin lies," Tennora said—as soon as it was out of her mouth she felt her cheeks flame red. He was not a man she should be insulting. Indeed, Sovann's eyes had narrowed, though his smile didn't budge. She felt an apology float to her lips, but she kept her mouth shut and her eyes hard.

"They *sound* illegal," he said. "Wouldn't want to call the Watch on a pretty thing like you. You'd better head home."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

Tennora crossed her arms over her chest. "All right. Go ahead. I'll tell them it's part of my research, looking into magically improving locks. What will you say about your wares?"

Sovann smiled. "We have an understanding, the local Watch captain and I."

Tennora leaned on the counter's table, growing angrier than she could ever remember being. She narrowed her eyes right back at him. "And how much will that understanding cost you if I start shouting once they get here? They'll take one look at me and—"

Tennora stiffened. Her belt had just become almost imperceptibly lighter. She turned to find one of the young men walking quickly toward the door, her coin purse in hand.

All that anger erupted inside her. She was through being laughed at.

She grabbed the mug sitting on the counter and hurled it at the thief.

It hit him squarely on the base of his skull and shattered, throwing shards of clay everywhere and sending a splash of tea down his neck. He stumbled, tripped on the staircase, and came down hard on his stomach—just in time for

Tennora to plant a boot on his wrist and wrench her coin purse away from him.

"I *have* the coin," she said, feeling as ferocious as if dragonfear were burning through her. "Now sell me the stlarning lockpicks!"

Silence reigned for an interminable moment.

Sovann's stiff smile eased into a grin of genuine amusement. Without taking his bright brown eyes off hers, he reached beneath the counter and pulled out a bundle of dark cloth. He unrolled it, revealing a row of sharp wires, pins, and hooks, shining in the sunlight as lovely and as precious as her aunt's good silver in the hands of a master.

"Now," Sovann said, "just where were you thinking of breaking into, duchess?"

"Who said I'm breaking into anywhere?" Tennora said archly. "This is for my research, remember?"

"Indeed. What sort of locks are you planning on ... testing?"

Tennora put on her most pleasant face. "Why don't you show me what you have, and I'll tell you what I want?"

Sovann's smile spread. "I'll give it to you, duchess. I can't tell whether you're canny as an archdevil or just a flibbertigibbet." He looked up at the remaining toughs loitering on the stairs. "Gents! Luce! Out! The lady'd like to peruse my wares. Take Knull out for a quaff and keep him awake." Two of the men helped the third up from the floor, and with the woman—Lucira—in the lead, they left the shop.

Tennora raised an eyebrow. Sovann winked at her. He waited for the last of the loiterers to exit before speaking.

"What sort of locks do you expect to be ... researching?"

"A variety," she answered swiftly.

"Well then, suppose you give me an idea of your ... skills."

Tennora lifted her chin in her haughtiest impression of her grandmother. "I have a certain natural knack," she said, "but those old picks aren't making anything easy on me."

Sovann seemed to weigh this.

"Where'd the old set come from?" Sovann asked, picking up one of the curved wires. He looked along its shaft. "These are antiques." "They were my mother's."

"A pretty North Ward girl like you ..." He shook his head, then paused, giving her a curious look. "Your mother's not Liferna Uskevren, is she?"

Tennora jerked back, startled. "How did you know that?"

He tilted his head. "Lockpicks aren't exactly collectibles of the well-to-do. And you ... are well-to-do, even if you're dressed like a scholar." He looked her up and down. "Liferna's your mam. Huh."

"She was. She died five years ago. Did you know her?"

"Never," he said. "Before my time. My old man told stories about his days rubbing shoulders with the best thieves in Waterdeep. He was mighty impressed with Liferna."

The Shadow Wind they called her—can't catch what you can't see."

"How melodramatic."

"A touch." He grinned again. "'Course, nothing to say your mother ever was a thief, slippery as she was. The Watch called her the Oyster, since all they ever figured out was that she liked pearls. My old man says she laughed hard about that one." He wet his lips. "I have to tell you, after all those stories I was a little sweet on the idea of the Shadow Wind—clever, blonde, ruthless."

"Thank you," Tennora said, uncertain of what she should say. "I suppose."

"What can I say? I was a strange boy," he said with a cheeky smile. He pulled from beneath the counter a lock mounted into a board. "So you can try them out," he explained.

Tennora's heart raced. "I'd ... much rather see you do it," she said. "I'd hate if I damaged your wares accidentally." He eyed her again, until Tennora was certain he was going to throw her out for being in the wrong shop. But she held her placid expression and kept her thoughts to herself.

"All right," he said again. "You're going to run into two main varieties around the city: warders and tumblers. A warder just needs a good skeleton key. There's one in here—just slide it in and go. Tumblers are the tricky ones."

"Of course," Tennora said.

"First," he said, choosing a long thin wedge from the set, "the turning tool." He slid it into the keyhole and held it slightly to one side.

"Then we'll start with this little hooked pick." He plucked it from the set and eased it into the keyhole, angling it upward. He looked up, and Tennora realized she had leaned in very close to watch. "Tell me the truth," he said softly. "How many times you done this?"

"Three," Tennora said. "One for each broken pick."

Sovann closed his eyes and sighed. He straightened and set the pick back with its fellows.

"No," Tennora said. "You said you'd sell me the—"

"I'm selling them to you, duchess," Sovann said. "I'm just not about to do it in a way that's going to get you into more trouble than either of us needs. Do you even know what you're doing?"

"Lifting the pins," Tennora said hotly.

"Which one first?"

Tennora racked her brain, trying to remember what had worked, but it had happened by pure luck. "The foremost," she said finally.

Sovann shook his head and sighed. "Your mam's probably turning sour in her crypt. All right—for your research—you're looking for what we call the binder. See, the grooves for the tumblers never do line up perfectly with each other. If you give it just a little twist with the turning tool, there will always be at least one pin that's rubbing on the groove just a little crooked, such that if you lift this one right, it'll get itself stuck. Here"—he held out the pick—"give it a try."

Tennora eased the pick into the keyhole, running the tip along the top of the keyhole. Starting at the front, she felt out each of the small pins that hung down into the key's path and lifted them gently into their channels. The third one stuck.

"Good," Sovann said. "Every time you find the binder, you can twist a bit more and the pressure changes to a different pin. Do it lightly though, or you'll lock it all up. So find the next binder."

She did, until all six pins were snugly in their grooves. She twisted the turning tool one last time and the lock opened.

"I did it," she said, elated. It was as good as getting a spell right the first try.

Sovann jiggled the lock. "Not too bad. Truth be told, I figured you'd shove those pins up too far and get them stuck. Happens to fumblehands."

Tennora felt a warm rush of pride. She'd noticed the edge that divided the pins from their resting places—she'd avoided getting them stuck all on her own.

"How much are they?"

"For you? Thirty gold." "I'll give you fifteen. I may not be an expert at locks," she added, seeing Sovann's raised eyebrow, "but I know those aren't worth thirty."

Sovann clasped his hands to his heart. "You wound me, duchess. Twenty-five."

"Twenty-two, since you gave me the lesson." His eyes twinkled. "Very well. For you."

She counted the coins out of her purse—and she said a little prayer of thanks to the goddess of merchants that he'd come down.

Sovann swept the coins into his hand and added them to the store's cash box. He wrapped the picks neatly in brown paper. As he came around the front of the counter to hand them to her, he nodded at her belt. "That dagger's your mother's too?"

"How can you tell?"

"It's not yours. You're wearing it crooked." He reached down and slid the sheath around to the front of her hip. "There," he said, straightening, "now you can grab it when you need to." He stood disconcertingly close to her.

He was not handsome like Cassian. His nose was crooked off to the left. His chin was rough, and a scar left a bare stripe across his jaw. There was a gap in his teeth just behind one canine. He was not handsome.

But when he looked at her with those dark eyes and smiled that wolfish smile, something behind Tennora's knees went soft.

And something in her tongue went sharp.

"Perhaps I should start practicing right now," she said.

"Perhaps." He chuckled. "But I have something I think you'll like better." He stepped back, and Tennora blew out a breath.

He climbed up the ladder and took down a silk pouch from one of the higher shelves—deepnight blue and embroidered all over with hair-thin lines of gold thread.

Sovann unlaced the bindings and opened it to display five silvery disks with points curving away from the center like the petals of a flower.

"Carvestars," he said, sliding one out of its bindings.

"Little daggers?"

Sovann smiled. "Can be."

He cocked his arm back and threw the carvestar across the room. It sank into the post of the door with a resounding *thunk*.

"But they're better thrown," he finished. "And since you've shown such terrific aim, I thought you might like to try them out."

A shiver ran up Tennora's spine. She reached out and laid tentative fingers on one of the carvestars. The metal was polished and smooth as water. She picked it up, gingerly avoiding the razor-sharp edge and considering for a moment her reflection in it.

She looked tired, with dark smudges under her eyes. But her eyes themselves danced. I want this, she thought.

Which was silly. She knew spells. If she ever had a cause to throw a carvestar, she'd do just as well throwing a fireball. Better even—one did not have to aim a fireball particularly, as long as it didn't burst in her face.

"How do you throw them?" she heard herself ask.

"Here," Sovann said, coming around the counter. "Hold it flat against your palm like ... that. And point your finger along here. Now pinch this with your thumb." He sidled

around behind her and set one hand on her hip. Tennora blushed. "Good. Now pull your arm back—farther." He held her wrist in one hand and smoothly pulled it back over her shoulder. "There, now, throw!"

She flung the carvestar overhand. It spun across the room to lodge itself above the front door—several feet above the front door. Tennora cringed.

"Not bad," Sovann said, and Tennora realized his other hand was on her hip now too. "For a first try," he added, giving her a little squeeze. "You'll get the hang of them." "Yes," she said. "Well ...". She stepped away, blushing furiously. What a fit her aunt would have! Coming down to a place like this, buying lockpicks, throwing weapons, and letting a complete stranger put his hands on her person.

But how she wanted those stars.

"How much?" she asked Sovann, who had climbed the nearby shelves and was leaning out to pluck the carvestar like the last apple on a tree.

"For you?" he said. He yanked the carvestar free and leaped down. "Consider it a gift."

"No," Tennora said. "No, no, no. I can't let you do that." She reached for her coin purse. Sovann grabbed her hand in his and held it to his lips, startling Tennora.

"Please, duchess," he said, turning her hand over and setting the carvestar in her palm. "Let me do this for you. For the new Shadow Wind."

"Oh," Tennora said, blushing again. "No, don't call me that."

Sovann winked. "Well, we'll have to wait and see what they call you in the chapbooks, won't we?" He opened the door for her with a little bow, and held out the rest of the carvestars in their case. "Won't doubt it's something to make those young boys dream. Come again sometime."

"I may," Tennora said, smiling back.

The street looked sunnier, and Tennora walked down it with a certain swagger. She had the lockpicks and the lovely carvestars. And though she certainly wasn't *interested* in the shopkeeper, there was something exhilarating about the way he made her feel sharp and clever, about the easy way she'd managed to flirt with him. She would go back, she was certain of it. And when she did, she'd be able to say she'd pulled off Aundra's heist, no longer mired in guilt over the thought of it.

It wasn't until she'd come to the end of the block that Tennora realized she was missing her purse once more, that it hadn't been there since Sovann rested his hands on her hips.

"Godstlarning hrast it!" she shouted, earning a look of sad knowing from the pair of highcoin lasses.

Nazra Mrays held her son's hand as they strolled through the marketplace. Antoum kept glancing back over his shoulder at Jorik and another bodyguard who followed.

"Mama? Aren't I going to be late for lessons?"

Nazra smiled and squeezed his hand. "I'm certain Master Halnian will not mind." It wasn't as if she would be able to go walking with her son forever. Another year or two and he

wouldn't want to hold her hand, but a girl's. She smiled at that and squeezed his hand again. If that old tailcoat-clinger minded, he wouldn't say a word. Not to Nazra.

"Master Halnian asked me if you liked the wards," Antoum said.

"Did he?" Nazra held back a derisive snort—as if she couldn't see through that play. "Did you tell him I like them just fine?"

"Yes," Antoum said. "He said you should tell him if they need adjusting. Sometimes spells need adjusting."

Nazra smiled. "I think I should tell him I have my own wizard to do such things. What do you think, dear heart? I'll just let you do all the spellcasting. Are you up to it?"

Antoum laughed. "No! Not yet. But I can make a light, and it lasts almost as long as Master Halnian's! And I can warm up my chocolate! I did it yesterday."

"Yes, you showed me," Nazra said. "And I remain terribly impressed."

A wind rushed up and blew a few strands of hair free of her hood. She tucked her graying curls behind her tapered ears. The storms that blew through Waterdeep chasing summer's end were tedious indeed. They would last perhaps a tenday, but made going about her business such a chore. At least the lords had gotten the cellarers' and plumbers' guild to regulate the runoff, and there were fewer drowned gardens than there had been in decades past.

"Buckle your cloak, dear," she said as another gust blew Antoum's cape back like a pair of wings.

"Ah, here we are." She pushed open the door of the cobbler's. A spell in the door made a chorus of chirping songbirds sing out into the shop. A narrow man whose clothes draped him as if they were hung from the knobs of his shoulders came out into the front room.

"Nazra!" the cobbler cried, throwing up his hands. "How marvelous! How glim!" He embraced Nazra. "Tell me what you want. I live to serve."

Nazra's mouth twisted into an amused smile and she fought not to laugh. Such delirious shows of gratitude weren't uncommon; she owned the building the cobbler rented from as well as a few others here and there in the Trades Ward.

"Dear Dellicot," she said. "We are here because my growing boy has a need for some new boots. And no ordinary boots—the best for my Antoum."

Antoum rolled his eyes. Nazra winked at him.

Dellicot patted one of a trio of needlepoint chairs. "Well, settle down here, young master, and we'll see how big you've grown!" He spread a piece of parchment on the floor while Antoum took off his shoes and set his bare feet on the sheet. Jorik slipped into a corner by the door.

The chirping rang through the shop again, and a dark-haired woman with no shoes on stepped into the shop. Dellicot's eyes flicked over her, no doubt sizing up her importance and how many coins she was likely to carry. The result could not have been positive, Nazra thought, wondering at the lack of shoes on the woman's feet and the awkward height of her hemline.

"Well met," Dellicot said after a moment. "You'll have to pardon me. I have a client just now. It might be best to come back later."

The woman stared at the shop without answering. She was uncomfortably tall, exacerbated by a sinewy musculature that made her look rangy as a wolf. When she'd finished examining the walls, she looked down at the cobbler with such blue-eyed frustration that Nazra instinctively stepped in front of Antoum.

"I want boots," she said. "So what do I pay you?"

"You'll have to wait, goodwoman," Dellicot said tersely. "I'm measuring Young Master Mrays."

The woman wrinkled her nose. "How long will that take?"

"A quarter hour," Dellicot said. "After the measurements, we must choose the proper hide and cut. Which, to answer your first question, will make the decision of how many coins it costs."

The woman stood for a moment, shifting from one foot to the other, as if trying to make up her mind, then dropped into the chair beside Nazra. Nazra smoothed her skirts behind her legs and sat as well.

For a long while, no one spoke. The woman sat studying Antoum and Dellicot and the measuring process, and Nazra sat studying the woman. There was something strange, something unsettling about her, but Nazra couldn't place it. Her eyes flicked up to Jorik's. He was watching too.

The woman looked up at Nazra. "He is your... son?" She said the word as if it were unfamiliar, as if another word wanted to take its place.

"That is what the midwife tells me," Nazra said lightly. "His name is Antoum."

"How old is he?"

"Eight years since this summer." Nazra smiled. "They get so big so quickly."

The woman nodded and swallowed hard. "It's strange," she said after a breath, "how pleasant it is to see someone with something we do not have. Cannot have. My offspring ... are dead," she added. "But I am glad to see yours is healthy."

Nazra's heart twisted. "I'm very sorry."

The woman regarded her, forlorn and somehow lost—again, as if something else were meant to take the place of their conversation. "It is an old loss. But you're kind." She fell into a sullen silence.

"Have you been in Waterdeep long?" Nazra asked.

"No," the woman said. "Only a few days."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Business." She looked away, off at the street beyond the store windows. "Important business. I will not be here long."

"All finished," Dellicot announced. "A growing lad indeed. It's a wonder your toes all fit inside, young master. Let us try ... these." Dellicot's eyes scanned the shelves of boots, samples of different sizes, and plucked a few pairs from the lower rack.

"We'll need two pairs," Nazra said, trying to shake the strange woman from her thoughts. "One for everyday, one for outings. Good leather. Antoum, you may choose a dye for the fancy pair."

"Enchantments?" Dellicot asked.

"Not necessary. He's going to outgrow them in a few months anyway." Nazra gave her son a sly smile. "Unless you want something to help you dance better, dear heart."

"Mama!" Antoum groaned.

Nazra smiled. "Well dear, if you keep begging off your lessons, you might use a little help impressing the girls at your parties."

The strange woman snorted. All three looked up at her.

Under their gaze, she seemed to draw back like a threatened snake, and once more Nazra was glad to be between the woman and Antoum.

"Do you not like dancing either, goodwoman?" Nazra said lightly.

The woman squirmed in her seat. "Not that sort. But I do not think that is a good basis of finding a ... a companion." She looked at Antoum. "I think you would find a girl you like better if you showed her your spells, little man. Then she'd know you were clever—and most times, clever is better than being a good dancer."

A shiver ran its icy feet up Nazra's back. She narrowed her eyes. "How did you know he studied magic?"

But instead of looking startled or embarrassed again, the woman got a faraway look.

"I have my wand," Antoum interrupted, holding it up as if this were the most obvious thing in the world. He looked up at the woman. "I'm supposed to be at lessons now. We're playing truant."

Nazra laughed. "Here is your lesson for today, my lad. Do not tattle on your mother." Antoum snickered into his hand. "Choose your color, Antoum, and we'll be off to your lessons in a song." She looked back at the woman, who watched Antoum forlornly. Whatever the woman's story was—poor, mad, friendless, lost—it was by the grace of the gods that they were not all in her place. The idea shook Nazra's calm core enough that she wanted more than anything to make it stop. She pulled the cobbler aside.

"Dellicot," Nazra said gently. "Give her some boots. Some of your samples. I'll pay for them. Add them to the bill."

"Are you sure?" Dellicot asked. "Far be it from me, but—"

"Please."

He glanced over her shoulder to where the woman stood. "All right."

"Thank you. Antoum," she called as she walked toward the door, "let's be off."

Still tying one boot he hopped toward her and the door, but he stopped to look up at the strange woman. "I hope you like Waterdeep," he said shyly.

The woman regarded him for a long, awkward moment before a small, uneven smile brightened her face. "Many

thanks," she said. "Go learn your magic, wyrmling."

"Antoum," Nazra said. He nodded once at the woman and scurried out the door ahead of her. Once more she made eye contact with the strange woman, and a chill went through her.

"Saer," Jorik said under his breath. "Nazra, are you all right?"

Her eyes snapped up to her bodyguard's. "Yes. Fine." She walked back out into the street and took Antoum's hand in her own. Not for the first time she noticed how much larger his little hand had gotten, and how fragile those bones still were, safe in her palm.

"Mama?" Antoum said, as they walked down Mendever Street toward the House of Wonder. "That woman was different, wasn't she?"

"Not so different," Nazra said.

SEVEN

Let's go," Nestrix said. "It's dark."

"The sun just went down. Be patient," Tennora said, not breaking her concentration. She threw another carvestar. *Thwack!* It sank solidly into the back of her door. She took up another.

"You said to wait until it was dark. It's dark," Nestrix said. Tennora threw the carvestar. *Thwack!* "You'll ruin your door," Nestrix said. "Let's just leave now, and you can practice throwing them at the antiquary."

Tennora ignored her. She didn't intend to throw the carvestars at anyone. It was a hobby. It was something to keep her mind off Master Halnian's decision, to keep her mind off the fact that she'd been robbed twice that day.

Thwack!

To keep her mind off the fact that she was planning to commit a burglary in less than an hour.

Her aim had improved over the last few hours, and though she still occasionally lost her grip and sent a blade flying into the wall or the floor or the bookshelves behind her, Tennora's confidence had improved as well.

If someone *did* try and harm her, they'd be sorry. ...

No, she thought, tugging the carvestars loose. No and no. They would wait until night was good and settled before breaking in. She had practiced with the lockpicks on her own door until the placement of the pins was as easy as

slipping into a familiar handshake. She knew plenty about spotting wards and spells. They would sneak in, sneak out, and no one would know they'd been there until the next morning.

She glanced over at Nestrix—the woman was so overcome with nervous energy she practically vibrated. How Nestrix had spent her day, Tennora still didn't know. The dragon had been in the apartment when she left and again when she came home, but she'd gained a good deal of information on where they were heading. And some boots.

"They feel strange," she'd complained. "All the toes are touching."

"You're probably unused to them still. Perhaps you should leave them here—"

"No," Nestrix had said, admiring the shiny black leather. "You said I was noticeable in bare feet. I can't be noticeable when we take the mask, right? So I wear them." By the charmed look on her face, Tennora suspected it had more to do with the fact that Nestrix liked owning something again.

"Don't you need to read your spellbook?" Nestrix said.

"I told you," Tennora said. "I'm not a wizard."

"And I'm not a knight," Nestrix countered. "But that doesn't mean I won't pick up a damned sword if I need to. Leave the door alone for an hour and learn your spells."

Nestrix had a point. It was better to be prepared. Tennora thought of her spellbook, nestled on its own shelf beside her bed. She hadn't opened it since being expelled. As she went to retrieve it, her stomach twisted with unease.

What was she so nervous about? She knew the spells—most of them. She had been confident—reasonably confident—about casting them less than two days before. Master Halnian's decision didn't change that.

Even so, her stomach flipped as she pulled her spellbook down.

"I need a little time," she said. She sat at the table and opened the book. Most of it was blank pages—pages that would probably never be filled, Tennora thought grimly.

She started with a few cantrips—simple spells she learned when she first began attending the House of Wonder. A spell to make light seemed useful; a spell to transport something through the air doubly so. They were so ingrained in her memory that Tennora wondered if she could forget them if she tried.

"I should tell you something," Nestrix suddenly said.

Tennora kept her eyes on the page. "Hmmm?"

"I ..." Nestrix started, then sighed heavily through her nose. "I wanted to tell you that ... this is a good thing you're doing."

Tennora looked up from her book, puzzled. "I beg your pardon? Breaking into a shop is a good thing?"

"No—that part's ... irrelevant." She seemed to collect her thoughts and said, "Helping ... with this ... is ... that is, I ... appreciate what you're doing."

Tennora smiled. "Do you mean, 'Thank you, Tennora, for helping me'?"

Nestrix scowled. "Yes. That. Although I could do it myself. I'd just rather not."

"You're welcome," Tennora said.

Tennora chose another spell, mentally going through the steps that would bring power along the broken paths of the Weave and into being as small bursts of acid. A trickier spell—when it worked, it knocked Tennora's thoughts so far off kilter that she couldn't find the path to casting it again. But it was powerful destruction magic.

She knew plenty of spells, of course, that could be used to hurt others—but to be honest, she had never had cause to use them for such a purpose. Dummies, targets, and the back of her door were one thing. A person was quite another.

"One thing at a time," she muttered under her breath, and turned the page.

The antiquary's shop was deep in the Trades Ward, to the southwest of where the God Catcher slept. In the depth of the night, not a street or alley seemed to be in its right place. Every path seemed either to be too full of shadows and threats or too full of lights and watching eyes. Searching street signs and dodging meant it took the better part of an hour to find Jembril Street.

The Timehands rang the hour before deepnight.

Tennora's heart pounded as hard as the hammers on the bells, but thrice as fast, as she stood in the shadows across the street from Treasures of the Ages, a modest and neatly painted shop. A pair of enchanted lamps flickered heatlessly with a pattern that had nothing to do with the draft that

blew down the way. The interior was faintly lit by the cool, unwavering light of a few glowballs.

"That's it?" Nestrix said almost reverently.

"Yes," Tennora said. She rubbed a thumb over the lumpy silhouettes of the lockpicks in the pack strapped to her belt. No one came in or out of the shop. No one moved in the light of the glowballs. They had no reason to turn back, she thought.

Nestrix started to cross the street, but Tennora caught her arm.

"Wait. We have to do this quickly," she said.

"What way is quicker than going now?"

Tennora scowled at her. "I'll do the door. You watch the street. If someone comes ..." She licked her lips. "We can't be caught doing this."

"I am not stupid either," Nestrix said. "I'll watch. If someone comes, I'll take care of it."

They slipped through the light of the street lamp and into the shadows beside the door. Tennora let out a breath as she stepped back into the safety of the darkness.

I can still go back, she thought.

She stayed, pressed against the wall of the antiquary's shop, just out of the reach of the lamps. After this, she would be a criminal. Even if they never caught her, never suspected her, she would be a thief. If she didn't steal the mask, if she bolted and ran back to the God Catcher, she had a chance.

She glanced over at Nestrix.

Spells first, she thought, and slid into the light to face the door. The lock was heavy and brutally obvious—she hoped the spell was the same.

She reached out her senses and felt for the changes, the reorganization of the threads that would show her how the spell hung on the entry.

Nothing.

She waved her fingers over the doorway. Still nothing.

There was no ward on the door.

Tennora frowned and tried to feel for it again. The door was dead.

Anxiety trilled through her thoughts. A shop that sold antiques should have a ward or two in addition to the heavy lock. If Tennora couldn't sense one, perhaps the ward it had was stronger than she could detect ... but detecting magic was something Tennora was actually quite good at. It would have to have been a massive, expensive spell. One the antiquary shouldn't have spent coin on.

So—which was more likely? The antiquary was wealthy and paranoid, or the antiquary was lax about the state of his or her wares?

She said a little prayer to the goddess of luck that it was the latter and slid the kit out from under her cloak.

Tennora slipped the turning tool out of its pocket and into the keyhole. Nothing tripped. Her hands shook and her

fingers didn't want to keep hold of the pick. She gripped it in her fist and took a long slow breath.

Focus, she told herself, and slid the pick into the keyhole.

The lock was complicated. Eight pins, as far as she could feel, and they were set so straight that she worried there would be nothing to bind the tumblers. Tennora willed herself to relax, to stay steady as she lifted the pins one by one into their homes.

"Someone's coming," Nestrix whispered, and a second later footsteps rang on the cobbles. Tennora cursed under her breath, and her hands started shaking.

"Get into the shadows," Nestrix ordered.

"Just a moment," Tennora whispered back, as another pin clicked into place. "I'm so close."

"Now!"

"Distract him!" Another pin clicked into place. If she stood, Tennora would have to let go of the tension and lose all her progress. She scraped along the top of the keyhole, hunting for the last two pins. The first one rose and fell easily. Tennora swore and went for the second.

Nestrix growled. From the second pouch around her neck, she pulled a packet of greased paper. She turned it over, shaking the contents into her cupped hand.

The footsteps were getting closer. Tennora risked a glance back. A young man in a heavily embroidered cloak of amethyst purple was walking down the street, still several buildings down.

Nestrix looked down at her. "Appreciate this, *dokaal*," she said, and stepped around Tennora.

She tossed the powder she had held in her hand into the air above her. As it drifted down, the silvery motes caught the light before settling on their skin. Tennora's skin prickled, and she nearly dropped the tools to scratch it.

"Don't speak," Nestrix whispered. "He can still hear you."

Which was when Tennora realized she couldn't see Nestrix any longer. Where Nestrix had stood, there was no one and nothing but the cool night air. She was still there, however—her strong hand clasped Tennora's shoulder.

"Keep working."

Tennora lifted the pick with a sudden jerk. The second pin locked. She hissed.

The sound of the young man's footsteps stopped. Nestrix's grip tightened on her shoulder.

Tennora dared not move, dared not breathe. He came a few steps toward them. Nestrix's grip relaxed, as if she meant to have her hand free, and the smell of storms billowed off her.

Please, Tennora thought, run away.

"Ahoy?" the man said. "Coins bright? Is someone there?"

Neither woman spoke. The man stood there watching for what felt like an eternity. Tennora's hands cramped around the lockpicks.

He spat loudly and muttered a curse under his breath, before his footsteps continued off into the night.

Bless us, Tymora, Tennora thought, and let that be the worst we encounter.

"What was that powder?" she whispered to Nestrix as she released the tension on the tumblers just a hair.

"The last of the wizard's gifts."

The pin dropped, like a blessing from above, and Tennora eased a little more tension back into the tumbler. This time it clicked into place without much trouble. Tennora breathed a sigh of relief and, despite still wanting to cast a fireball at him, silently thanked Sovann for the lesson. She went after the last pin.

"What wizard?"

"The one in Cormyr," Nestrix said. "He wasn't using it."

Click. Tennora looked up at Nestrix, who was slowly fading back into sight. "It's not a gift if you take it."

"Fine," Nestrix said with a cold smile. "Spoils."

Inside the shop the walls were lined with iron cases set with panes of glass that revealed within golden bowls, chains, and goblets; jewel-studded collars and belts; and delicate statues of gods and kings. Faint light shone from a trio of caged glowballs, and the metal reflected it coldly.

"What in the—" Nestrix said. Tennora hushed her. Nestrix scowled. "There's something strange here," she whispered.

"A trap?"

"No," Nestrix said. "These treasures—"

"Then let it wait," Tennora whispered.

There was a door at the back of the shop—a heavy, windowless door. Tennora crept toward it, scanning the floor for inconsistencies.

Aha! There before the doorway—just where a person would have to kneel to pick the lock—the boards had been cut away in a square and reset. The edge blended into the grain and the grooves of the rest of the floor, but when Tennora felt gingerly along the suspected edge, there was the faintest gap around it. She bit her lip.

From the looks of it, pressure would set off the trap. She unrolled her kit and picked through the various tools until she found a stout rod with a tapered tip—not too unlike the turning tool. She wedged the tip under the edge of the panel and eased back. It lifted away from the floor. Tennora felt something tugging back on the panel—the mechanism beneath. From the way it didn't want to ride up more than a hairbreadth or so, the trap had to be connected fairly close to the edge.

"Nestrix," Tennora hissed. She couldn't let the panel fall, and she couldn't lever it up against the other side without chancing engaging the mechanism beneath. She glanced behind her. Nestrix stood before a display of brooches, making a face.

Tennora called her twice more before Nestrix looked up.

"We have to lift both sides of this." She shifted her weight enough to kick the open kit toward Nestrix. "Give me a hand."

Nestrix kneeled down beside her and picked out another stiff, tapered rod, a little slimmer than Tennora's. "Did you see those brooches?" she whispered.

"No," Tennora said. "Tell me later. I can't hold this up forever."

Nestrix harrumphed and slid around to the other side of the board. Tennora lowered her side—very slowly, very slightly—until Nestrix could jam the second wedge into the gap.

"Lift slowly," Tennora warned. Together they moved the panel out of its spot, until the bottom showed over the floor's surface.

Tennora tugged upward slightly—it was still attached to the trap beneath.

"Hrast," she swore under her breath. Without heavier pry bars, they wouldn't be able to remove it. She didn't dare let it drop back down—it would surely trip the mechanism. If they could only hold it there ...

"Wait," Tennora said, eyeing the shape of the hole. "Hold it there." She pressed her thumb to one corner and pushed toward the side so that the panel turned around its center. The mechanism beneath squealed slightly, but it did not trip.

And the panel sat, balanced on its corners, stable and unmoving.

The door beyond was warded—as heavily as Tennora had expected and then some. She traced the pattern of the spell with her mind's eye. A complex, knotty ward. An alarm combined with a nasty and explosive burst of acid. And

something else ... though what wasn't clear. Just the fact that the spell veered ever so slightly into the frayed remnants of the Weave in a direction she didn't expect.

"This is going to take me a while," she whispered. "Look around and make certain we're alone."

Tennora felt her way through the first of the spell's defenses, smooth threads of magic retwined into a neat web. No matter what Master Halnian said, Tennora knew she was more than a mere dabbler. She sensed the effort in the spell, the care with which its caster had brought the broken magic together. She sensed the fragile points, the joining of one bit to the next—and with her own whispered spells, she teased loose the connections. First the alarms unhooked bit by bit. Sparks of green light spat and nipped her fingertips.

The trap was more complicated—the magic knotted and snarled around more compact spells. The shop, the treasures, the sound of Nestrix's footfalls as she paced the shop floor—all vanished in Tennora's mind, replaced by the spell that sang with the dirge of the dead goddess.

And for a moment, that song was Tennora. She smiled.

The spell shimmered and came undone. Tennora opened the door.

"Nestrix," she said. "We're in."

Gold, platinum, gems—the room beyond was no larger than Tennora's apartment, but shimmering treasures draped every inch. A shelf ran along three walls, heaped with sealed parchment and elaborately stamped books. There was a table in the center of the room, noticeable only for the regular shape of the pile in the middle.

Nestrix's eyes roamed the vault with unbridled greed. If she'd started salivating, Tennora wouldn't have been surprised. Falling to one knee, Nestrix ran a light hand over the glittering scales of a platinum-plated mermaid, entwined around a silver column.

"This one," she murmured. "I want this one."

"No," Tennora said. "We're looking for a mask, Aundra said."

"We could take this too. No one said *only* take the mask."

"I said it. We're not thieves."

"Of course. We're just people who take things but not other things," Nestrix said, but left the statue to search the piles of treasure for Aundra's mask.

Tennora shoved aside a stack of gold chains and a pile of rubies. What had Aundra said? A gold-feathered mask in a case.

"Don't you think this is peculiar?" Nestrix said.

"Later," Tennora said.

A moment later, Nestrix spoke again. "We should find the mask and get out."

Tennora fought the urge to snap at her. Hadn't she said that already? Of course, Nestrix didn't listen to anyone but Nestrix.

"You're right," she said. "Keep looking."

"We're not ..." Nestrix started to say, but broke off with a frown at a pile of books and another of her distant stares.

The case lay beneath a bolt of silk and a shield emblazoned with a rearing griffon. It was flat, hardly thicker than her wrist, and made of a heavily waxed wood without any ornament. Tennora nearly discounted it out of hand, but not wanting to leave any stone unturned, she opened the case.

Nestled against a layer of watered silk lay the mask.

It was shaped like the face of a woman with full lips and a tapered chin. But instead of a smooth plane of skin, delicate feathers sculpted by a master's hand layered her cheeks and forehead. Tennora lifted it from the case. It was heavier than it looked, and as her hands closed on the mask she felt the trill of enchantment.

Tennora laid the mask back in the case and snapped it shut. "I have it," she said to Nestrix.

"Hsst!" Nestrix stood stock still, staring at the door like a dog that has sensed a robber's movement beyond. Tennora held perfectly still, listening for the sound that disturbed Nestrix's happy looting.

Nothing.

Nestrix made a sharp gesture for Tennora to get behind her. Tennora drew a pair of carvestars and held one ready to throw.

Still nothing.

"Come on," Nestrix murmured. She crept toward the door.

The shop beyond was silent as the grave.

They stood there, quiet and searching the gloom. Nothing but the shapes of the cabinets and cases. Not a sound but their own breath.

Nestrix eased out of the doorway, step by careful step. Tennora followed, careful to shift her weight gently across the floorboards.

A pale but steady light suddenly illumined the room from the far corner.

The silhouettes of four people stood out against the faint light, the edges of their weapons reflecting glimmers.

The light grew brighter, revealing two men carrying short axes and a woman with a sling. The man farthest away—the owner, by his well-cut suit and expensive gloves—held two knives so sharp they could have cut Tennora's gasp to ribbons.

"Well, well, well," he said. "What a pretty pair of thieves. You picked the wrong shop to break into, my little magpies."

"Run," Nestrix growled, and shoved Tennora away from the treasure room. She stumbled and scrambled toward the door.

Out of the darkness, a knife flew across Tennora's path—just inches from her throat. Blind instinct seized her, and Tennora twisted away from the blade, falling back to the ground behind a display of tarnished silver. She landed hard on one hip and glanced up at the knife, quivering in the framework of a cabinet.

Nestrix still stood a few steps from the treasure room. Between the tables and cabinets, Tennora could make out three of the men advancing. She pulled herself to her knees

and over the top of the silver display, readied her carvestar in a shaking hand.

Just as Nestrix's dragonfear flooded the room.

Later, Tennora would wonder what had made the difference—before, had the dragonfear been an accident of Nestrix's mood? Had she really been angry? Had she ever been angry before that night in the antiquary's shop?

For out of nothing, terror wrapped an icy hand around Tennora's heart and she knew by the way the men froze stiff that it had them as well. She risked a glance at Nestrix. She had drawn herself up like a striking serpent. Her fingernails seemed sharp as blades, her bared teeth iron, her dark hair violent whips. Tennora shook to the core of her heart, watching as something terrible climbed out of her friend's skin—something that looked and sounded like Nestrix and not at all like Nestrix. Something that thundered and wailed like a windstorm with its very presence, and screamed for all of their blood.

"Who dares?" she said in a voice like the storm's. "*Who dares threaten me?*"

Tennora squeezed her eyes shut. It *is* Nestrix, she told herself. This isn't real. This is the dragonfear. Fight it, damn it. Fight it.

Trembling with adrenaline, she opened her eyes again and saw that the axe men were petrified where they stood. The slinger had collapsed.

The man with the knives clung to a post and watched Nestrix with astonishment plain on his face.

But not fear, no. If he'd felt it, he'd mastered it as Tennora had.

"Do not interfere in my business," Nestrix rumbled. "Flee, before—Ow!" She broke off as a knife caught her in the thigh. The dragonfear drained out of the room.

"Another player for the game?" the man with the knives said. He called to the others, "They seek to depose your master! Kill them!"

Tennora whipped the carvestar at the two axe men. It missed, but chimed against one's axe, taking his attention off Nestrix. He swung around toward Tennora with a wicked grin. So big he had to have ogre blood in him, he had little trouble wading over the displays. Tennora scuttled backward toward the door, fumbling for another carvestar.

Nestrix wrenched the blade from her leg and claimed it as her own—what little good it would do her against the axe, Tennora thought.

Her own attacker was closing in on her, his axe ready. Instead of the carvestar, she raised a hand.

"Ziastayix," she said, and sent two bolts of silver speeding toward the massive axe wielder. Both struck him, and he ducked down behind a row of cabinets, having learned his lesson.

A bullet from the sling retorted. The glass pane of the carved cabinet behind her shattered, sending splinters of glass into her path, and Tennora let out a shriek of surprise. The axe man took his chance and rushed her.

The words of a spell rose up quickly in her mind and flowed out of her mouth as her hands reached toward the

axe man.

The spell flew from Tennora's hand, wobbling and spreading unevenly into a spider's web. It hit the man with the axe, wrapping his free arm and sticking to a column. Tennora sprinted past him toward Nestrix.

The edge of the axe caught her jacket and tore through the quilting, nicking the skin beneath. A shallow cut, but gods, it burned.

And bled. She pressed her left hand to the wound and felt a trickle of blood seeping through her fingers.

The momentary distraction slowed her down, and the man in the well-cut suit was suddenly between her and Nestrix. Without thinking, she threw the second carvestar.

It was utter luck that it caught him in the arm that held the knife. He cried out and clutched the wound. Tennora raised her hand, and a fireball bloomed from it. She cringed away, but the blaze still caught the edge of her sleeve.

Fortunately, she saw as she smothered the burning cuff with her cloak, the bulk of it had swept over the man with the knives, charring his leathers and throwing him backward. He fell against one of the heavy iron cabinets, and it toppled over, pinning him. He did not get up. Heart in her throat, she sped past him to Nestrix.

Nestrix ducked the axe that swept toward her neck. It lodged instead in the wall. She darted forward with the stolen knife and caught the man just under his collarbone, plunging the knife up to its hilt. He screamed and stumbled, trying to pull out the dagger. It wouldn't budge, caught against bone or gristle.

Tennora fell back a step at the sight. Blood spurted from the wound. Nestrix rounded on her, eyes sharp. She grabbed Tennora's arm and yanked her back into the doorway as another bullet whizzed past.

"There," she said, pointing into the darkness. "Spell!"

Tennora obediently raised a shaking finger. "*Ziastayix*." Two more bolts of silver shot across the room, briefly illuminating the woman with the sling before slamming into her.

The axe man fell to the floor, still bleeding, still trying to pull the dagger free. Blood wheezed from his mouth. The knife was in his lung.

Nestrix looked down at him, a puzzled expression on her face. She reached down and wrenched the man's head. His neck popped. His legs kicked once. Then he lay still and twisted.

"Oh gods," Tennora said. She took another step back toward the exit.

"Tennora!" Nestrix shouted.

The urn that had been on the iron cabinet caught under her feet and she fell backward over it.

Just as the blade of the broad-shouldered man's axe sliced through the air where she had been. It came down instead on the handle of his fellow's axe, snapping the haft. He hauled the heavy blade back up and turned to Tennora, trapped on the ground.

Nestrix snarled—a hideous, animal sound—and she picked up the broken half of the axe handle. With a roar, she

tackled him, knocking him off his feet. The broken axe handle came down hard on his head, over and over again. Tennora scrambled to her feet. The man's skull cracked with a sound too like an egg's shell. Blood spattered against the tarnished silver.

Tennora grasped Nestrix's arm before the handle could come down again. "Come on!" she said. "While we have the chance!"

Nestrix looked up at her with an animal's incomprehension, as if she didn't know Tennora. As if she didn't know why she should stop beating in the man's head.

"He's dead," Tennora said, and her voice shook as she said it. She tugged hard on Nestrix's arm until Nestrix dropped the club.

"I ..." Nestrix said, hesitantly. "I don't ... We should go."

"Yes!" Tennora said. "Now! Please!" She pulled Nestrix to her feet and grabbed the case with the mask.

They ran off into the night.

Shattered glass glittered on the floor. The broken carcasses of more than one wooden cabinet lay splintered and spilling out their entrails of treasures. The ceiling sagged above the cracked column. His lackey's blood and brains clung to the better part of a set of silver.

Ferremo Magli surveyed the damage to the shop as Alina bound the wound on his arm. His knee—mangled and twisted by the fallen iron cabinet—would need a healer's

touch. The pain was barely contained by the anesthetic potion he'd gulped down.

It was nothing compared to what his master would do if Ferremo didn't fix things.

Another dragon shouldn't have been there, rifling through his master's seed hoard. And yet there she'd been, clad as a beggar woman and ripping his men down with her dragonfear. He'd almost been swept away by it himself, but he'd had more practice rising above it than the others.

Her *lovac*—for what else could she be?—was something different. A wizard's spells one moment, a thieves slippery weapons the next, nervous as a rabbit in a fox's den, and yet always a step ahead of the blades. Tennora, the dragon had called her.

Ferremo frowned. The name itched at the back of his mind in a way he found profoundly annoying. He knew the name—now where did he know it from?

Ferremo, a voice boomed through his thoughts and sent them scattering. *Report to me.*

"My lord," he said reverently. "There was a break-in indeed. We caught them—two women—coming out of the treasure room and—"

What have they taken? the voice snarled.

"I do not know yet, master. We'll find out soon, but there's something more. Something important."

There had better be. I presume you did not fail me lightly.

Ferremo winced. "No. It's ..."

Speak!

"There seems to be another player in the game, my lord."

He quickly related the events of the evening, descriptions of the two women, and particularly of the tall one—the one who'd flooded the room with dragonfear and killed two of his men. "She's ... playing on the edge of the rules."

How did this happen, Ferremo? His patron's tone was dangerous. Rogue player or not, no one was to know we've moved into Waterdeep. How did they find out?

Ferremo started to protest his ignorance—they *had* taken all possible precautions. But the memory that had itched in his mind earlier crawled to the front of his thoughts, and he checked himself. He remembered where he had heard the name Tennora, and Ferremo breathed a sigh of relief.

"I have a suspicion, my lord," Ferremo said.

Rhinzen Halnian woke from a dreamless sleep to the sound of a knife scratching on its sheath and the prick of a blade settling on his throat. Nerves nearly made him sit up, right into the blade, but a hand pressed against his forehead an instant sooner.

"Well met, Master Halnian," Ferremo Magli said with exaggerated grace. "Who's Tennora?" "What?" Rhinzen gasped. "Who?"

"Tennora," the assassin said. "You spoke her name this evening, and tonight a thief with the same name ruined my master's shop. So I ask again. Who. Is. Tennora?"

"Tennora? She's ... she was my student."

Ferremo's smile peeled open past his copper canines. "I'm glad to hear that. Sets my heart at ease to know you're guilty before we get on with things."

"Guilty?" Rhinzen said. He was starting to feel a bit like a trained bird. "Guilty of what? Of letting my worst apprentice go?"

"You took my master's coin," Ferremo said, "and ran off to tell his plans to another *taaldarax*. We don't take well to that, Master Halnian." The edge of his blade traced the prominence of Rhinzen's throat.

"Wait ..." Rhinzen said, starting to make sense of things. "You think I sent Tennora to rob you? Tennora Hedare?" Rhinzen laughed. "If I were going to cheat you, I certainly would have a better plan than that. That girl is North Ward, born and bred. Proper as a portrait. And she's terrible at magic."

"Good enough to throw fire in my face. And decent with a carvestar."

"Now I know you have the wrong girl. My Tennora would be more likely to throw a book at you." Rhinzen laughed again. The press of the knife cut him short. "Look," he said, "there are probably plenty of Tennoras—"

"But not plenty who know you. And certainly not plenty who run around with dragons."

"I'll tell you where she lives. You could go and see that it's certainly not the same girl. Though," he added, wetting his lips, "if it were, you would probably find the treasure and evidence of the ... the dragon."

The knife edged away a hair. Ferremo seemed to be considering it, but given what he'd learned in the last few days, Rhinzen suspected the assassin was conferring with his monstrous patron. The distant look in the man's eyes gave him away.

The knife abruptly went back into its sheath. "Very well. Where does she live?"

EIGHT

By the time they had made their way back to the God Catcher, the gray light of dawn was slinking through the alleys and courtyards of Waterdeep. Still trembling with shock and unused to traveling in the south end of the Trades Ward at night, Tennora had gotten lost in the maze of streets and alleys, not noticing where she turned or where she continued. She couldn't think straight—she dared not think straight. She walked hoping the passage of block after block of cobbles beneath her feet would be enough to drive the memories of the heist from her mind.

But when Tennora slipped in through the doors of the God Catcher as quietly as possible—lest her neighbors spot her at that time of the morning, stained with some stranger's death and carrying a sack with a golden mask in it—her thoughts were still full of flying knives and broken necks, spatters of brain, and the sound of a man choking on his own blood.

Nestrix clomped up behind her, her new boots echoing on the stairs. Tennora winced and sprinted up to her apartment, imagining the city Watch hot on her heels. She had made her peace with being a thief—just this once—but murder? There was no making peace with that.

Her hands shook as she unlocked the door. She swept into the apartment, grateful to be out of the sight of others, away from the blood and the broken glass. The leaflet with Nestrix's face was still sitting, folded up, on the table. Tennora set one hand on it and covered her eyes with the other. She could have seen this. She could have prevented it.

"Are you all right?" Nestrix asked, coming in and closing the door. "You look ill."

Tennora didn't move. "Ill is too light a word. That was ... terrible."

Nestrix sighed and sat down. "Horrible. I very much wish I'd taken that lovely statue." "Don't you even care that we killed someone?" Tennora said.

"Just now?" Nestrix said. "That hardly counted."

"Of course not," Tennora said bitterly. She turned to face Nestrix. "It's vulgar to count, isn't that right?"

"Don't be dramatic. It doesn't count because they were attacking us."

"Because we were robbing them! We *killed* two of the antiquary's guards, and he's trapped under a cabinet, probably"—her voice caught in her throat—"bleeding out."

Nestrix rolled her eyes. "Don't waste your pity on those fools. They weren't exactly trying to show us their wares. As if they'd had any to show."

"Of course they weren't! They were trying to stop us. ... What do you mean by that? The shop was full of wares."

"That wasn't an antiquary's shop," Nestrix said.

Tennora was so startled by the assertion, she stared at Nestrix for a few breaths, waiting for her to amend it. When she didn't, Tennora burst out, "Of course it was! What else would it be?"

Nestrix gave her a look, as if Tennora were being willfully ignorant. "What antiquary trying to sell things fills the part of the shop people see with worthless junk and hides the valuables in the back? That was a lot of rubbish in those cases—polished-up rubbish, but rubbish still. The gold's nothing but brass, the silver's shiny tin, the gems were all chipped quartz and painted glass. The only genuine thing there was that ugly little pin with the spinel on it." She shook her head. "No one with the sense to collect the treasures in the back room would try and convince others that garbage was worth buying. They're trying to keep customers away."

Tennora stared, wondering why a dragon would know so much about shopkeepers. "Did you memorize *everything* in that shop?"

"Most of it. I'm not a *white*, after all," Nestrix said with a sneer. "It was the saddest little hoard I've seen in a while. It might very well *be* a white's."

"Hoard?"

"That was a seed hoard, make no mistake. You have a dragon in your midst, and he's aggressive. And sloppy."

"Dragons can't just show up in Waterdeep," Tennora said. "The dragonward—"

"The dragonward is fallible. Look at me."

Tennora sighed, exasperated. "You hardly count." Dragonfear rippled over Tennora, but she shook it off. "Stop doing that."

"Whether I count or not," Nestrix said in a low voice, "another dragon, a *taaldarax*, is behind that shop. Mark my

words."

"That doesn't excuse you just killing those men!"

"Are you mad? You should be thanking me for killing his minions and *lovac*. Without them, his plans will have to slow down. Don't you know *anything*?"

"I know killing is against the law."

"So is stealing," Nestrix said. "And if you play, it's against the rules to move without your agents—so we slowed him down. If you're lucky, when I'm returned to my true form, I'll help you deal with the *taaldarax*." She smoothed her skirt down and gave Tennora a smug look. "Won't you be happy when I can return your favors?"

"I don't want you to return *any* favors by killing someone!" Tennora said. "Godsdamnit, Nestrix, there's a difference between pilfering someone's valuables and *killing* their servants!"

The fear rolled over her like a tidal wave as Nestrix surged to her feet. "You *ungrateful* little *dokaal*! I saved your *life* by killing that man—did you even think of that?"

She hadn't, and that was on purpose. The memory of being pinned by the axe blade, of the man drawing his knife and coming toward her, would not sit comfortably in her mind no matter which way she turned it. She had nearly been killed—the thought made her stomach drop.

However, the memory of Nestrix bludgeoning a man to death with a broken axe haft was never going to find a comfortable place either. The hollow cracking sound would haunt her thoughts forever. And the man writhing on the

floor with a dagger stuck in his chest. The soft pop of his neck breaking ...

"My life wouldn't have needed saving if we hadn't been robbing them," she said, desperate to tie the events together in her mind. The antiquary was the victim. Not her, not Nestrix.

"They are *lovacs*," Nestrix snapped. "And their *taaldarax* plays lightly with the rules. If they are here in your city, your life would have needed saving soon enough." She stood and drew herself up. "You don't even care what I did for you."

"Not when you're acting like a monster."

"If you're going to treat me like a monster, then I'm free to act like one," Nestrix said, her eyes briefly flaring blue. "And if you're going to act like an ungrateful, law-bound—"

"Get out," Tennora said.

Nestrix drew back. "What?"

"Get out. Get out of my home." She pulled the eggshell in its pouch from her neck and held it out. Tennora felt her hands shaking, even harder than they had when the man with the dagger in his chest had died at her feet. But her gut and her wits screamed the same thing. "I am through helping you."

She expected the dragonfear that flowed over her, but strangely it was weak and almost halfhearted. Nestrix's cheeks flushed, and her eyes had taken on their characteristic glow.

"How dare you speak—"

"I don't care," Tennora said. "I don't care what you think you've done for me, I can't do this any longer. I wish you luck. Get out." Nestrix's mouth snapped shut.

"Fine," she said. "Fine. As you say." She snatched the pouch from Tennora, turned, and stalked toward the door. "You would have made a terrible *lovac*. It's better that I don't take your help."

She slammed the door so fiercely that a jagged strip, damaged by Tennora's carvestars, fell out of the wood.

Tennora ran to the door and threw the bolt. Stepping back into her sitting area, she eyed the back of the door for a few breaths, expecting Nestrix to return, angry and pounding on the door, full of curses and threats and violence. Her hands itched to grab the dagger, to be ready for the inevitability of the blue dragon turning on her word. To show Nestrix how serious she was.

But Nestrix didn't return.

The quiet unknotted the careful hold Tennora had kept on herself since the night began. Sapped of everything she'd held in reserve, she sank down onto her rug and wept until she fell asleep.

"Pardon me," Veron said to the sailors clustered beside the street vendor selling fishcakes. He held up one of the leaflets printed with Clytemorrenestrix's portrait and information. "Have you seen this woman?"

Like all the people he'd approached that day, they squinted at the paper and shook their heads.

"Wouldn't mind seein' her though," one of the men said. The woman beside him gave him a shove.

"Idiot," she said. "They don't make sheets like that for dancing girls. That's for high crimes. Murderers and robbers and such."

"Indeed," Veron said. "She's wanted for both. If you see her, let me know." He gave them the name of the inn he was staying at, for all the good it would do him. No one on the streets had seen Clytemornestrix. No one but the young woman from the statue.

The young woman he couldn't seem to find alone and in a public place. Two days in a row, he had waited in the street, just out of sight. She'd come out twice the first day: once for just for a moment, too quick for him to reach her, before slipping back inside; and once again, but a young man had stepped up to talk to her, and Veron had fallen back.

If anything were out of place, he'd scare off his quarry and possibly end up discussing things with the Watch besides.

Tennora, the hearth house owner had called her. He'd waited in the hearth house that night, though she hadn't come, and when he'd taken his place the following day, the owner had chased him off, shouting that he didn't want to see him around anymore.

After the man's previous cheer, Veron was sure Tennora knew he was watching for her.

"Pardon me," Veron said, approaching a well-dressed man carrying a ledger off a large sailing ship. "Do you accept passengers on your vessel?"

The man looked him up and down with naked surprise, his gaze lingering half a moment on Veron's protruding teeth. "On occasion," he said, "but—"

Veron held out the leaflet. "Not for me. I'm looking for a criminal. She's in the city, but I have suspicions she may flee. Would you keep an eye out for her?" "Oh ... Of course," the man said, taking the paper. He tucked it into his ledger then looked Veron over again. "You speak very good Common," the man said.

Veron pursed his mouth. "Yes, well, it is my first language."

"Oh," the man said, looking faintly embarrassed. "Raised by your mother then? Good of her."

"I suppose," Veron said, blandly.

"Does she live in Waterdeep then?"

"No, Silverymoon."

"Ah," the man said, with a knowing furrow to his brow. "One of those Many-Arrows brutes then?"

"No, *that* would be my mother." Veron paused, trying to cool his annoyance. "She's the one from the kingdom of Many-Arrows."

"Eh?"

"She's the orc," he said. "She moved to Silverymoon when my parents wed."

"Oh!" the man said turning a deeper shade of red. "Yes, yes of course. Well ... you ought to have said something!

Good day to you." He skittered off down the road.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have said *anything*," Veron muttered. He sometimes wondered if it wouldn't be less scandalous to make up a story about a pillaged farmstead and a roving tribe of berserker orcs. At least the man had had the grace to be embarrassed at his mistake.

He bought a fishcake from the vendor and pondered his next move.

"Coins bright, there?" Veron looked up from his slake to see a red-haired half-elf standing in front of him and holding one of his leaflets. "You're looking for this one?"

"Yes," Veron said, wiping the crumbs from his hands. "Have you seen her?" "Maybe," she said. "What's it get me if I have?"

Veron stifled another sigh. "A percentage," he said vaguely. "The goodwill of Cormyr. And I won't tell anyone you're harboring a fugitive."

She gave him a withering look. "Not much of a bargain that. And I haven't said I was harboring her. Just that I might have seen her." She leaned a little closer. "And for what it's worth, the Watch and more might be interested in her too. Her and some little blonde birdie. Know anything about that?"

Veron narrowed his eyes. "I'm only interested in the murder."

She smiled at him. "Pity. Thought we might have had something to talk about."

"Goodwoman," he said, "I'm not leaving this city without my quarry. If you don't—"

"Will you take her dead?"

Veron paused. Dead was not what the Nagaenils had asked for. Dead would not get him his full bounty.

It would get him off of this trail and onto something new.

"It's not ideal," he said, "and I don't recommend you try it."

"That's my problem," she said with a winning smile. "I'll let you know what I find out." Before Veron could ask her name or tell her where to find him, she turned on her heel and disappeared quickly into the crowd.

Tennora startled awake, her thoughts heavy with dreams of knives, blood coming up out of her mouth, and the sound of Nestrix laughing as she held Tennora down with a log of wood across her chest until she couldn't breathe.

The Timehands started chiming tharsun. Tennora rubbed her eyes.

"Hells," she said. She'd been asleep for nearly twelve hours. She glanced back at the door as she sat up. Still locked.

A sharp pain seized her just below the ribs, and she remembered the axe and the cut to her side. She stripped off her clothes and dampened a rag in the remnants of Nestrix's bathwater. She gently scrubbed the blood from the cut on her side. It wasn't deep—the axe had bitten in just

enough to peel back her skin in a strip as long as her index finger—but it had turned an angry red and burned, and the flesh beneath was tender and purpled. She frowned at it and smeared a good dollop of ointment over the cut before binding it up with rags.

Blood—hers and perhaps the two men's—was drying brown and clotty on her blouse and the belt of her trousers. Shuddering, she balled the clothing up and threw it in the corner. She unfolded fresh clothes from the drawers that lined her sleeping loft, and dressed—the memory of the big man being beaten to death threatening to overwhelm her.

Never, never in Tennora's life had she ever witnessed anything so shocking to her understanding of the way the world worked. People died. She knew that, she accepted that—she had watched first her father, then her mother fall to the featherlung epidemic, their lungs day by day failing, seizing, until they couldn't draw another breath without aid—and soon they could draw no breath at all. The epidemic had killed at least three hundred people besides her parents, and the few score who had survived the illness—including herself—still fought for a good deep breath when the weather was dry. She did not like to dwell on it.

But with those deaths, she did not have to look the featherlung epidemic in the eye. She did not have to watch its eyes light up as it drove the life out of her parents' bodies. She did not end up wondering if the featherlung had enjoyed taking her mother and father, if she did let herself dwell on it.

He would have killed you, a small voice in the back of her thoughts said. She imagined how it would have felt if the axe had buried itself in her chest rather than nicking her

waist. She closed her eyes—it would probably not be too dissimilar from the end of featherlung.

In the Hedare family, she'd caught the featherlung first, from a serving girl who had later died. Tennora had spent a long tenday wheezing and trying to get her dry, weak lungs to take the air she was squeezing into them. They hung damp cloths over her face, hoping to moisten her breath, and it made it even harder to breathe. Her chest did not merely ache; the sharp pains that seized her and shook her with spasmodic coughing felt like a hundred knives stabbing up through her diaphragm. The disease desiccated her lungs, and toward the end the tissue had cracked and bled. When she coughed, rusty clumps of dried blood came up.

For a tenday, she felt sure she was going to die.

Then, blessedly, she began to recover. The air came into her lungs in cautious and increasing gasps, and soon after she could sit up. Her breath grew deeper, her stamina improved. She was allowed to go on short walks and visit her parents, sitting by their bedsides. She could not, the healers said, be infected again, and it would do Liferna and Mesial good to have their daughter near.

The healers had been wrong.

As they worsened and weakened and the treatments and prayers failed, Tennora was sent away so that she wouldn't witness the disease's final blow.

But Tennora knew all too well what it would be like. Some nights that was what she dreamed of—the pain in her chest and the blood in her dry, aching lungs.

The last thing her father had said to her was, "Never forget I love you. Never forget your mother loves you. I know

you will make the best path of your life."

The last thing her mother had said to her was, "My darling, do not cry when they bury me. Don't give Aowena and the old lord something to hang you on."

She sat down and pulled her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms around her knees, and laid her head on her elbows. She didn't want to think about her parents. Neither of them would have been too happy with her, but right then, she wasn't too happy with them either. As devastated as she'd been when she'd lost her mother, the realization that the woman who lay beside Tennora's father in the Hedare family tomb was as good as a stranger left her aching anew.

And still, there was the problem of Nestrix.

Tennora thought about alerting the Watch—but what good would that do? She was as much a criminal, as far as they knew, as Nestrix. She'd make Nestrix angry, she'd tip off the men from the antiquary's shop, and she'd be under the Watch's suspicion to boot. And maybe she should be ...

She dug her fingers into her hair. The day was growing long, and she had to make up her mind. She went to stand by the window. Nestrix was not in the square, and neither were the Watch. The clouds shifted for a moment, and a ray of sun reflecting off the sphere of the God Catcher struck Tennora's sill.

Aundra.

Tennora looked up at her landlady's abode. Aundra would return tonight to pick up the mask. Tennora could explain what happened. Aundra would understand and

explain to the Watch that hers were extraordinary circumstances.

She hoped. There was still the matter that Aundra had been the one to orchestrate the theft in the first place.

Sitting there thinking and thinking and thinking wasn't going to do her a scrap of good though. She had to get out of the God Catcher. Somewhere public and safe and distracting. Her stomach growled. Somewhere she could find a slake.

Tennora put her cloak on and picked up her shopping basket.

The marketplace was busy, despite the low-hanging clouds threatening to burst into storm once more. The sunshine filtered through the rain clouds as a cool, dim light that made the colors of the tents and the stormcloaks stand out bright as spring blossoms and ease the gloom a little.

Tennora strolled through the stalls, taking in the smells of fruit and baking flatbreads; the sounds of flower girls calling out prices and of cleavers coming down on big, rosy cuts of meat; the colors of fat oranges and coffee beans from far south, gold chains, and roses.

Every sensation grated on her.

She kept a polite smile on her face and kept her gaze perusing the various wares, but inside her mind her thoughts were a brewing tempest.

Aundra would help—she must. But where would that leave Nestrix? She'd seemed to enjoy the fight and killing the two men. Tennora shouldn't care where things left the

strange woman. She should be glad to have survived the whole mess.

But the dead men *had* been trying to kill them. She could ignore that until time ran backward, and it would still be waiting for her. The men weren't simply victims.

And Nestrix had said the antiquary's shop was a dragon's hoard. Not just a dragon. A *taaldarax*.

The word tickled at Tennora's thoughts—where had she heard it? But the more she tried to pin it down, the more it slipped away from her stressed and tired mind. Nestrix had said the *taaldarax* needed those men. Was it a dragon that couldn't leave its lair? A dragon that collected antiques and relics?

Tennora sighed. She'd look it up later.

She noticed the half-orc, the one from the hearth-house, when she stopped to pick out a few plums. He stood three stalls down, examining fat, spiny perch, but really watching Tennora out of the corner of his eye. He wore his hood low, and a crossbow was strapped to his back. He looked nervous.

Don't panic, Tennora thought. She paid for the plums and hurried into the crowds, twisting between the shoppers to put as many bodies between her and the half-orc as possible. She'd lost suitors in crowded ballrooms that way—she'd lose him too.

She stopped again and bought some butter, glancing back the way she'd come. Again the half-orc was three stalls down, pretending to shop for wooden boxes, but watching her rather than the merchant. The merchant was giving him a hard look.

He was clearly no zealot—even if the hope had lingered in her despite the nature of the leaflet, there was no way he was anything but a hunter after Nestrix.

And Tennora.

He was following her. He recognized her. Who did he think she was, and what did he think she'd done? Her stomach turned over at the possibilities. He was stronger and he was probably faster. He was certainly as slippery as she was.

Tennora took a deep breath and made up her mind.

She slipped between the stalls and doubled back along the other side of Market Street, keeping her eyes forward until she had passed the Market Hall that stood halfway down the row of stalls.

The half-orc was still behind her.

Tennora hurried around a stall of curios and through a tent displaying polished apples. She glanced over her shoulder. He was still behind her, watching her zigzag through the crowded stalls.

More tenacious, she thought, than an Adarbrent. No chance of escaping—he'd follow her anywhere she could go. Her heart was pounding again.

If she couldn't escape, she'd have to let him corner her.

She walked faster. When she broke free of the crowds, she sprinted up the road and ducked into the alley alongside a bakery. A doorway off the alley presented itself, and she ducked into the niche, flattening herself against its side. She drew her dagger and held her breath.

The half-orc bolted down the alleyway a few moments later. He stopped a few feet beyond the doorway, glancing around. She leaped out of her hiding spot, dagger ready.

He shouted in alarm and froze when the tip of her blade found his ribs.

"Put your hands on your head," Tennora said, "push back your hood, and look at me."

He did, moving very slowly. For the first time, Tennora got a decent look at his face. He wasn't much older than she was. His eyes were a strange golden color, and his hair was jet black and in sore need of a trim. His skin was the muddied grayish green she'd expected, but through it his cheeks burned pink.

"Are you blushing?" she blurted.

"A woman half my size is holding me up in an alley," he said, annoyed. "What do you think?"

Tennora jabbed him with the dagger point. "How long have you been following me?"

He hesitated. "Since you left the tenement. You never came back to the hearth-house."

"And how is that any of your business?"

"It isn't what you think," he said. "I know about—"

"Selune preserve us," Tennora said. "Look, you can threaten and blackmail me all you like, but I have nothing to do whatsoever with that Cormyrean. So kindly shove off before I call the Watch on you, Goodman ..."

"Veron," he said, lowering his hands. "Veron Angalen. I'm a bounty hunter, sent to capture the woman who calls herself Clytemorrenestrix. And I need your help."

They walked back to the God Catcher and found a spot out of the rain beneath the statue's cheek. Veron told her about the wizard, the one Nestrix admitted to killing, and the brutal mess of his throat. Tennora was ready to hear that, and it was easy—surprisingly easy—to remind herself that Nestrix had been fighting off an attacker, someone like the men in the antiquary's. Easy to imagine the wizard, leering and cocksure, and Nestrix, cornered and determined.

It was not as easy to accept Veron's version of Nestrix's origins.

"She appeared a decade ago, near Tymanther," Veron said. "Before that, I can find no one who remembers seeing a woman claiming to be Clytemorrenestrix."

"Perhaps she was somewhere else," Tennora said.

"And perhaps she was *someone* else," Veron said. "Look, I don't doubt she's spellscarred. The lands around Tymanther are full of active spellplague pockets. Why is it so hard to believe she might have gone into the changeland swamps, maybe lost off the road, maybe looking for someone gone missing? She goes through the blue fire, and it changes her. It gives her powers, but it addles her too. Makes her think she's a dragon."

"She doesn't have a spellscar. I've seen her undressed." Veron's eyes darted away, and he blushed again. "She took a bath," Tennora added sharply.

Veron closed his eyes, as if he were trying to calm himself, and took a deep breath. "According to the wizard's notes, she has a scar as long as a child's forearm on the right side of her rib cage. That's it, I wager."

The mating scar, Tennora realized. "It doesn't have the glow."

He scowled. "Well, they don't glow unless the spellscarred are using them, do they now? A spellscar is a good way to get that dragonfear people say she has. She used it on you?"

"Yes," Tennora said. "It's rather variable."

"And you'd expect a dragon to do better, wouldn't you? Look, I know it's hard to hear. But you need to understand, she's mad. She does truly believe she's a dragon trapped in a human body—believes it with such conviction that she's convinced a fair number of folks. Smart people. Not just you."

"What are you going to do to her?" Tennora asked.

"There's a bounty on her in Cormyr. That wizard she killed has friends. She's got to face judgment." He pursed his lips, then spoke again. "And if they don't execute her, there's people in Chessenta and Tymanther that will pay to speak with her too."

"What sorts of people?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?" That hit a nerve of some sort, and he scowled again.

"How many do you think she's killed?" Tennora said softly.

"At least a dozen. Probably more. Hard to get a count."

"Are you certain?" Tennora said. He nodded, and she closed her eyes. "What do you want me to do?"

"You can't take her alone. Neither of us can. We need to distract her. When she comes back, tell her that you want to go somewhere. Concoct a reason—it doesn't matter what, but start thinking of it now." He pressed a token into her hands. "Go out the door and back down the main road over there. When you get within ten paces of the alley behind the brewer, drop it. That will send me a signal you're close, and we'll be able to take her down quickly."

"I don't think that will work," Tennora said, recalling the Watch. Had that really been less than a tenday ago?

"It will work because you will be there. She trusts you." "I don't know if I can do this to her."

He set a hand on her shoulder. "You must. She's killed."

"We have all sinned," she said, echoing Nestrix.

The little water leaders ran shrieking across the square, soaked to the skin and happy for every breath of it. Even if they were poor, even if they were orphaned or homeless, nothing terrible seemed to touch them as they scampered in the last gasps of summer.

"Don't do it for what she's done, then. Help me to stop her from killing again. Lives depend on it."

She thought of the man with his neck broken lying on the floor. Of the way Nestrix had nearly attacked her. Of the way she might look, lying on the floor with her head twisted.

Tennora shuddered. "All right. I'll do it."

"Good," he said, and pulled the hood of his cloak up. "If she catches on, drop the token early and I'll come help." He started to walk away.

"Veron," Tennora said, "do you know what *taaldarax* means?"

He stopped and looked back at her with a puzzled frown. "No. It's Draconic though, if I don't miss my guess."

"She said there was another dragon. A *taaldarax*."

"I doubt it," Veron said. "But if there is a dragon, your lords know about it."

That was true, Tennora thought as she trudged up the stairs. The dragonward existed for a purpose. No dragon could enter the city without suffering from its effects. Ahghairon's spells had protected the city for well-nigh four centuries. The only way for a dragon to survive the effects unscathed was to touch the dragonstaff and stay in the good graces of its bearer. If there was another dragon here, a genuine dragon, the Masked Lords who ruled the city had to know about it.

Maybe it was a good sort of dragon, she thought, coming up to her landing.

Maybe it was protecting the city.

Maybe ...

An uneasy feeling settled on Tennora as she reached to open her door. Something wasn't right.

Something had changed.

Scolding herself, she shook the feeling off. All this skulking around was making her nervous. Nestrix had probably returned and left the door—

No, she thought, because the door is locked. To reassure herself, she twisted the doorknob.

It opened.

The uneasiness grew into a full-bodied alarm. She slid her mother's dagger around to the small of her back, keeping one hand on it as she nudged the door open with her shopping basket.

A man dressed in a green velvet coat was sitting in her chair. He looked young, perhaps a little older than Tennora herself, with pale skin and eyes the shady color of set emeralds. Across his knees rested a cane with a crystal set in the handle. He had turned the chair to face the door, and he greeted her with a razor-sharp smile.

"Well met, Lady Hedare," he said. "I believe you have something that belongs to me."

NINE

Nestrix stormed through the city and down Market Street, no longer noticing where she was. If she'd had her wings, she'd have relished her dark mood, used it as an excuse to swoop low over the crowded stalls, scattering fat merchants and dawdling maids, breathing great gales of lightning until the colorful cloths ignited and the curios melted and the fruit roasted whole. Maybe tear the mast off a ship or two and frighten the sailors off the deck and into the deep. Remind the world of who she was. She shivered.

But trapped on the ground, all she could do was stomp through the crowded market until the cobblestones made her feet ache through the boots she was supposed to be finding a spot for in her new hoard.

This was Tennora's fault. She should turn back right now and crack the little bitch's head open on the windowsill. Leave her there and go after Aundra Blacklock herself. Teach the sorceress to meddle with her. Teach Tennora to speak to her like a common *dokaal* nothing! Even diminished as she was, she could make them fear her, make them wish ... make them ...

Nestrix heaved a great sigh. The truth was she didn't *want* to kill Tennora or hurt her—or even particularly frighten her. She wanted Tennora to be sorry for saying those things—that she was a monster, that she had done something unforgivable—and she didn't want to force the words from her.

And why was that? The girl was helpful, it was true—but helpful or not, what more was she going to do? She thought

of the way Tennora had brushed her hair, and rolled her eyes at her own growing sentimentality. As if the girl would polish her scales and help organize her treasure once Aundra had fixed everything. Everything would be over once Nestrix was a dragon again. Tennora had said it herself: Nestrix wasn't the color of dragon she could trust.

A fat drop of rain hit the crown of her head, jarring Nestrix from her thoughts. She looked up in time to see a bolt of lightning race across the horizon before the rain began to fall in earnest. A shiver ran through her. What she wouldn't give to dance in the lightning again.

The crowd scattered for the relative shelter of the shops and the tents. Nestrix watched the rain coming down for a few minutes before she became aware of the sensation of her dress sticking to her skin.

It wasn't a sensation she'd bothered to notice before, but now that Tennora had shown her she didn't *have* to be wet when it rained, Nestrix found it extremely irritating.

A man on the street whistled lasciviously at her. She turned and glared at him, and the catcall died on his lips. Not being soaked through would prevent *that* too. Hooting and cackling like a rooster—she'd long realized it was a *dokaal's* way of trying to mate, but Tiamat take her if she understood any of it.

Tennora had a cloak for the wet weather. Nestrix could go back and take it. Tennora might even give it to her. Maybe she'd apologize and then make her some tea. ...

"No," she said to herself. She didn't need Tennora's help. She would find her own cloak and show Tennora she could take care of herself just fine.

A few minutes' walk down the street brought Nestrix to a shop with an elaborate gilded sign—*Valhana Darvien, Fine Clothing and Tailoring*. In the window, two wooden forms of women were posed, both wearing ruffled dresses.

The memory slid into her thoughts like a sharp knife—the golden-haired woman, a cloak around her shoulders, a wooden form in the corner, someone measuring the cloth asking if she didn't want to buy a nice dress or perhaps a new set of—

"Stop it!" Nestrix hissed and clutched her head. The memory retreated.

Nestrix stared at the window for a moment. It looked a little like the one in the foreign memory—the fabrics heavier, the gowns unfamiliar. But ... those strange memories had recognized it.

Shown it to her.

She shook her head. It was just a likely place to have cloaks. Nothing more.

Bells strung on the doorframe tinkled merrily as she stepped inside. The carpet was green and very thick, as if it grew out of the floor in tangled mats. Nestrix rocked her weight against it, finding her balance. A slim girl looked up from behind a counter's table. Her dark eyes flicked over Nestrix, and she didn't bother to hide the sneer that curled her lip.

"Well met," she said. "I believe you want the seamstress on the other side of the market. Goodwoman Laever."

Nestrix frowned. "I came *here* to buy clothes."

"We don't have what you're looking for," the girl said, coming out from behind the table. "You should move along."

Nestrix narrowed her eyes. "Why? I want to buy some clothes. You're selling clothes."

"Yes, and this is a very high-quality establishment." She looked Nestrix over once again. "We don't have anything in your ... size."

The rear of the store was filled with row after row of fabric on bolts, ready to be fashioned into all manner of garments. Nestrix looked at them pointedly, but the girl didn't budge. She looked at Nestrix as if she were defending her hoard against something weak and trembling. Something *cowardly*.

Rage swelled inside Nestrix like a physical thing, a force that might push through her skin and make wings and claws and teeth. She felt the dragonfear racing ahead of it like lightning before thunder. The girl's eyes widened a little as it wrapped itself around her, and Nestrix smiled, ready for the rage to crash and rumble and storm through her.

All at once, the fear slipped out of her grasp, taking the force of her anger along with it. The vacuum left her dizzy, and when she put a hand out to steady herself against the desk, the world spun and she fell to one knee on the thick carpet.

The alien memories surged into the void and pressed on her the feeling of killing a man in a dark alley, a soldier of some sort, with a sword that didn't belong to her. The air overflowed with the stale, fishy smell of a dockside, and another man was shouting at her, shouting at Lyra.

Nestrix gasped and pulled herself up.

"Get out!" the girl said, recoiling.

"I have coin and I want to buy clothes," Nestrix growled.

"Get out or I'll call the Watch!"

"Chennae, what's going on out there?" a new voice called out. Nestrix pulled herself to her feet in time to see a plump woman in neat work clothes come in from the back room. She glanced over Nestrix. "Good afternoon. Is there a problem?"

"Yes," she said, shoving the memory aside. It wouldn't budge, and it filled in the dead man's rusty armor, the stubble on his cheek, the whites of his eyes. "I'd like to buy some clothes."

The woman folded her hands in front of her. Though her skin was pale and sun-sheltered, her hands looked as if they had known many years of work. "Very well. How much were you planning on spending?"

The other man—his name was Gralik—he grabbed her by the arm, pulling her back, saying they had to run. She'd loved him ... no, someone had loved him.

Nestrix focused on the seamstress, her head pounding with the effort. "I ... don't know. What do they cost?"

The remembered affection swelled up in her, threatening to overwhelm her. He had been kind, clever, short-tempered, but so had she been. A match, an equal.

No, Nestrix thought, and replaced the man with the sinuous coils and sharp eyes of Tantlevgithus, a true match, a true equal, lover, and opponent in all the ways a mate should be.

The alien memory snapped like a string pulled too taut and let Nestrix back into the real world. She gasped at the shift.

The girl, Chennai, snorted. Her mistress gave her a stern look.

"Chennai, go to the back room and find something to do," she said. The girl looked as if she'd been slapped for a moment, but gave a dutiful curtsy and left. The seamstress took her place behind the counter's table.

"You don't look as if you've done this before," she said. "Perhaps I can save you some time. A simple dress—no god's-eyes, no lace, homespun cloth—will cost you two silvers and three coppers."

"All right."

"Is it?"

Nestrix squirmed a little. She knew what the seamstress must be thinking—with her too-small dress and her heavy boots, there was no way that Nestrix could afford such finery. She thought of the hillocks of gold coins, stamped with the faces of scores of rulers she had once used as her bed. But that stirred up more thoughts ...

As easy as it would be to shout the seamstress down and make her take the coin, Nestrix doubted it would work. Not with this one.

You were clever once, she told herself. Weren't you?

"I'm ... new to Waterdeep," she said. "My clothes were lost. My trunks were ... misplaced on the caravan I took here."

The seamstress raised an eyebrow. "Misplaced?"

"Bandits in the passes," Nestrix amended. "Things were ... very confusing afterward. I've sent for my things from"—Where had Tennora thought she was from?—"Tethyr. But in the mean-time"—she looked down at Tennora's old clothes—"I borrowed this. I don't like it. I have plenty of coin." She pulled her purse from her neck and opened it on the table. Gold and silver spilled out on the surface. "There. You see?"

"It *is* your coin?" the seamstress asked.

"Of course." It was now, at any rate, but that was a line of logic not every *dokaal* followed, so she invented some more. "My father was an adventurer. I inherited a fair amount," she added, thinking of the portrait of Tennora's dam and the man in the hearth-house. People seemed to like adventurers; everyone in the city seemed to know one or be one or think they'd make a good one. The seamstress smiled.

"You'll pardon my presumption. Better to ask than to have the Watch on me," she said. "You'd best store it in a strongbox though. You're like as well to have your purse plucked carrying those coins around. But I think we might be able to lighten your load a bit." She smiled cheerily. "What were you planning on purchasing?"

Nestrix hesitated. Just a cloak, but that had been before they'd insulted her pride so. "Quite a bit," she said. "Perhaps. It depends upon ... when everything else—"

The seamstress nodded. "Your things will arrive. Eventually. But to start, a good sturdy dress or two for day, something fancy for evenings, a stormcloak, and a few frilly smallclothes should stand you. We can measure you today,

but it will take a tenday or two to get the other pieces finished."

Nestrix bit her tongue in annoyance. In a tenday, she would need none of this. "Is there any way I could get the stormcloak now?" Nestrix said. "I'm tired of being wet."

"The storms do get tiresome. Every year, the same time, but they only last a tenday or so. I do have a finished cloak," the seamstress said. "If you're not too picky about the color—one of the Hawkwinter girls ordered it." She sighed and shook her head. "I send her a message saying it's finished. She sends one back saying she's no longer interested. 'The cut is gauche.' More likely she burned through her allowance for the month."

"Yes," Nestrix said, hardly understanding a word the woman said.

"That's what comes of spoiling children, I suppose. Stand up here"—she helped Nestrix onto a wooden box before a full-length mirror—"and we'll see if you like it." She bustled into the next room and left Nestrix to consider the mirror.

The reflection of a woman—her dark hair damp and curling, her skin a freckled brown, her eyes a nostalgic shade of blue—looked back at Nestrix. She curled her lip. So did the reflection.

"Here we are," the seamstress said, coming up behind Nestrix with the cloak in a muslin bag. "Lucky you, it hasn't been hemmed as yet. You're a bit tall to be a match for Young Lady Hawkwinter."

Nestrix closed her eyes—she was not tall. She was a mite, a crumb, a mouse. Once she would have filled this room from floor to ceiling; now a score of her wouldn't come

close to filling it. She felt untethered and flimsy. If she opened her eyes, the vertigo and the memories would claim her again.

She felt the seamstress settle the cloak on her shoulders and straighten the hem. "There we are. What do you think?"

Nestrix opened her eyes.

The cloak was blue.

... the color of a stormy sunrise over the desert...

A chill ran up Nestrix's neck. Her own ancient memories unfolded. Blue—*the shade of an angry sea, the shade of the night and the moonlight reflecting off the sand dunes*—blue, the color of dragon scales. *Ulhar*—the quickest, the wisest. It hung down in the shape of wings.

... The shape of her wings, draped over her back as she dozed near the cavern's mouth ...

Her breath caught in her throat, and she fought to keep her mind still and empty.

"I say, that shade suits you very well," the seamstress said. "Better than Lady Hawkwinter, even. What do you think?"

Nestrix swallowed. "It's perfect."

... blue and the blood red of rubies settled in her claws: one, two, three ...

"I'll let you have it for four silvers. That's a quarter off, since it's already made."

... blue and the red of rubies and the wash of gold in the back of the cave where she settles the rubies, like eggs in a nest ...

"Yes," Nestrix breathed.

... blue and gold and red like eggs in a nest, the nest tucked farther back still, three mottled eggs buried in a mound of sand. She sifts more sand over the nest; they need to stay warm ...

"Stand up straight, and I'll hem it for you. Shoulders back, now."

First she'd placed the statuette, the figure of some dead god from before she was hatched—a pretty thing even Tantlevgithus was jealous of—into the pile of coins and chains, then the rubies, then back to the eggs. She smiled, standing on the box in the tailor's shop, to remember it.

The thief who slipped in behind her came after. She remembered the sound of footsteps as she sprinkled sand over her clutch. She remembered looking back over her draped wings at a noise. She remembered slipping through the side caverns toward the entrance, of peering around the corner to see the woman hardly as tall as Nestrix's elbow creeping down the tunnel. Her leather armor blended into the gloom of the cave, but Nestrix's sharp eyes picked it out. Her hair was like spun gold.

... gold and red and blue, blue is the anger that storms and howls through her. Protect the treasure, protect the eggs. No filthy dokaal thieves hands will touch them ...

She remembered stalking the thief, the woman's form obstructed and revealed by stalagmites and columns. Invisibility cloaked Nestrix; the thief never saw her. The fool,

the bitch—Nestrix would make sure the thief regretted her intrusion before she died.

... protect the eggs, protect the eggs. She'll not take them. Tantlevgithus will be jealous she took this prey alone. He is so young and furious—but this one is hers ...

She remembered the thief coming to the treasure in the lower cave, watching her run her hands over the glittering jewels. She lit a sunrod, thinking herself alone—Nestrix remembered licking her lips, crouching for the attack.

... That's it—sift through the jewels, don't mind me, nothing to bother you. Who cares if that's mine? She picks up a gold-chased mithral torque, a beautiful thing with a great fat sapphire in the middle, and slips it around her neck. Creep forward, one claw at a time until the smell of the girl is heavy and close as old meat...

She remembered how her breath stirred the thief's hair, how the girl had ducked suddenly, twisting beneath Nestrix and scrambling to her feet behind her. She ran for the exit—the exit Nestrix was careful to cover and hide from intruders—the one that led out into the Calim Desert. Nestrix pursued.

... gold is the torque and the hair of the thief; red is the blood pounding in her veins; blue is the fire that tears into the night, the desert, the world beneath their feet.

As they ran into the desert, as she caught up to the thief, the Spellplague ripped through Toril.

She remembered the feeling like molten glass in her veins, and then the heat vanishing, the glass suddenly going cold and stiff. And over again, hot and cold cycling through her veins until they split open. She remembered the

girl, the thief, her eyes wide and then wider, her skin splitting and bubbling as the strange Blue Fire ripped through them both. The thief seemed to explode—she grew so quickly—and Clytemorrenestrix collapsed into herself at the same rate. Her scales felt as if they themselves were on fire—her first introduction to the nerves and softness of a human's skin. She roared, but the sound was thin and tore her throat. When the thief screamed alongside Nestrix, it was the voice of a dragon, not an anguished girl.

... blue is the fire and the end of the world, the end of the wings on her back, the end of the scales on her arms, the claws on her fingers, the end of long nights while the moon reflects on the dunes ... blue is the death of the goddess ...

And for a moment she'd forgotten and pushed aside for a hundred years, she knew the thieves thoughts, her life, her secrets as intimately as if they'd been her own. Her name had been Lyra. She had kissed her first boy at twelve and killed her first man at nineteen. She found the cave of Clytemorrenestrix after caravan guards spoke of the treasure the blue dragon had stolen from them tendays earlier. She wanted the treasure for the same simple reason Clytemorrenestrix did—it was beautiful and it was tricky to get.

Her thoughts and memories intertwined with Nestrix's, as tenacious as ivy. She watched the thieves intrusion into her cave from Lyra's eyes, felt the sudden terror as she turned and saw the great and terrible head of the blue dragon looming over her.

Nestrix remembered the Blue Fire going on a very long time. She remembered the emptiness it created in its wake.

She remembered waking up in more pain than she'd ever imagined, in the valley of a bronze dragon's coiled body. She remembered looking down at the horror of her fleshy hands, her feet, those useless breasts. In the moonlight of that night, Nestrix felt the loss of her blue scales as keenly as she felt the absence of the Weave. Nothing, she was certain—although later she would convince herself otherwise—would ever be the same.

The bronze was dead, strangled by the torque it had worn as the thief, the same torque she had stolen from the hoard. Nestrix set a shaking, muddy-colored hand on the gore-smeared cabochon, now the size of her whole palm. The horror of the sight drove her heart like a wind whips a sandstorm out of a clear night. Her chest tightened around her breath.

Then she remembered her clutch.

She scrambled up the side of the bronze, struggling to get her back legs—they were suddenly so long—underneath her. The scales cut her bare feet. She kept slipping in the blood. Her tail was gone—without it she had no idea how to keep her balance. Tripping, running half upright, half on her hands and knees, Nestrix came to the cave entrance.

Instead of the cave, instead of the bluff that held her lair, Clytemorrenestrix found a pile of rubble lanced by a spire of glass. As if the Blue Fire had melted the sand and pulled it up through the roof of the cavern.

Streaks of gold, blisters of rubies and sapphires, grit and rock embedded in the spire. And halfway up—twice Nestrix's shriveled height—the charred remains of blue eggs.

A scream built in her throat, but it couldn't find its way out. She fell to her knees, eyes locked on her clutch, and

gasped for air. They were gone. They were gone. Nothing could bring them back.

She threw back her head and noiselessly sobbed at the Blue Fire still dancing over her head.

Then the rubble stirred and *something* crawled out. She looked down. The scream exploded from her throat as the monster hauled itself out of the remnants of her home.

Of all the things she would refuse to forgive the Spellplague for, what it did to her third egg would be the last she let go of.

What crawled from the rubble was coated in a slime of yolk, and bits of the shattered shell clung to its hide. It hadn't been ready. It hadn't been time for the hatching. The wyrmling crawled toward her on stubby, half-formed legs, its blind eyes still dark patches. Its hungry maw was augmented by that shattered magic, rimmed by toothed tentacles that waved toward her. Curled inside its shell, it had been small enough to fit in the hollow of her claw before the Spellplague had started; what stalked her now was half again as big as she'd become.

It did not know her. And as it clambered toward her, she did not know it.

Nestrix scrambled away, through the rubble. She threw rocks and shards of glass, learning quickly how to work her new, flexible hands. The thing howled and squealed, but didn't slow. Its tentacle-teeth lashed the air, catching her soft ankle. Nestrix grabbed hold of one and yanked. The creature squealed again and shuffled back a few steps, clearing enough of the rubble for Nestrix to see the edge of her hoard. And the handle of an axe.

She'd never held an axe as a weapon before—the thief in her thoughts seemed to take hold of it for her, recognizing a weapon and not a bauble—and she swung wildly, still unsteady on two legs. It bit into the creature's still-unhardened flesh again and again, without aim. The thing screeched and thrashed, and managed to wrap a pair of tentacles around her waist, pulling her toward its mouth.

She pulled the axe up. And swung down into the creature's skull. Over and over.

It twitched, and the tentacles went slack.

Nestrix collapsed. She remembered sitting there on the ground, blood thudding in her ears, every muscle shaking. She remembered looking up at the creature, remembered seeing the eggshells and the yolk shining in the moonlight. Remembered the realization flooding her like a second wave of the Blue Fire.

She'd killed the last of her eggs.

She remembered the scream, and the night that stretched on forever. ...

A sharp pain in her ankle brought her back to the present, and she was standing again on the box in the tailor's shop in the middle of a city she should never have been in.

"Sorry, dear," the seamstress said, coming to her feet. "That last pin missed. Is that a good length?"

Nestrix's head pounded, and she finally recognized the thoughts of someone else swirled and coiled in her mind.

Suddenly she wanted nothing so much as to run, out through the rain, away from the city, as far and as fast as she could. She looked at herself in the mirror. She was clutching the pouch that held a fragment of her last egg's shell. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

She wiped them before she realized what a strange thought that was—her eyes. She looked at the reflection again, wrapped in its blue cape, and felt ... what? Sorrow. Pity. Anger.

Recognition.

She shivered. The city was doing terrible things to her. Tennora was doing terrible things to her. It was a test, a trial—at the end of it she would have her wings back and the thief out of her thoughts. She had to. For her lost eggs. For Tantlevgithus.

But then a little voice inside her wondered, in the dark of the night will I miss this soft skin or the taste of summer ale or the feel of boots on my feet?

The seamstress was looking up at her. She swallowed. "It will do."

Ferremo Magli strolled down Market Street, glad of the rain and the season. It gave him an excellent chance to wear his new stormcloak—a thoroughly dashing, dark green affair with black leather trim. He'd done his share the previous night, fighting off those mad little thieves and shaking down the eladrin once more. His master would take care of the rest.

The effort of a few hours to track down the *lovac*, and by sunset his master would be unchallenged.

Which meant this afternoon, he had a chance to visit his favorite tailor's and pick up his latest acquisition in plenty of time for the brightstarfeast tomorrow. It had long been his philosophy that people were bound to notice an assassin who dressed like an assassin. Why not be the most noticeable person in the room instead, gather compliments, and save the black for the night work? He liked to think the difference made more of an impression on his victims as well—he thought back to Rhinzen's insults in the carriage the other night, quickly followed by his whimpering for mercy. Ferremo smiled to himself.

He was in such a pleasant mood, he nearly walked right into the tailor's without noticing the woman who stood in the back of the room. The same woman who had killed two of his men the previous night.

It couldn't be, he thought, looking through the window at the tall, dark-haired woman being fitted and offered a selection of silks. Plenty of dark-haired, tall women in the city. Tymora didn't smile on him twice.

But she glanced to the side, to answer a question or trade some banter, and he was certain: the proud nose, the sour look, those eyes—like his master's—just a shade too bright to be natural. The blue dragon.

In the back of Ferremo's mind, he called out to his master, a thought that streamed off into the city, to the other's mind.

His master's voice did not answer. Ferremo called out again.

This time the reply was like a punch to the *lovac's* brain, so sharp he stepped back from the window as if he could escape it. The message was clear: Andareunarthex was busy.

Ferremo rubbed his temple. If his master was busy, it meant he'd likely found the little blonde thief who'd put a blade in his arm. The assassin smiled. Good.

Other dragons of the great game—he had come to understand—stayed out of the action and sent their *lovacs* into the world, to plant the beginnings of actions, to encourage the growth of their plans, and to seek out other pieces for the *taaldarax* to use in play. Other dragons watched and calculated and gave orders. They did not get their claws dirty.

But when Ferremo had reported back the name of the blue dragon's *lovac* and the address she would be found at, Andareunarthex had shut down any suggestion of Ferremo or one of his minions handling Tennora Hedare.

"This move is mine," he'd said. "Be ready if I need you."

"Is this allowed?" Ferremo asked. After all, attacking another player was very clearly against the rules. Dareun fixed him with a poisonous grin.

"She has already broken that rule by attacking the seed hoard," he said. "She cannot claim its protection now."

Which meant he would be busy for a long time indeed. Ferremo would just have to delay the blue dragon until she could be dealt with properly.

TEN

You have the advantage of me, I'm afraid," Tennora said calmly, as if the man were a guest at one of her aunt and uncle's even-feasts. Her nerves had been stretched taut too many times in the last two days, but if she imagined him sitting in a corner, if that velvet jerkin were a doublet and half-cloak, she might manage. "And I do believe my door was locked. Did someone let you in?"

"A well-bred girl," the man said with a smile that twisted the corner of his mouth. He raised the cane off his lap, and Tennora felt the spell he cast slam the door behind her. "I approve of your manners," he said, laying the cane across his knees once again. "You may call me Dareun."

He remained sitting, his hands resting on the cane. The crystal in the handle glittered with an iridescence that was not wholly natural. Tennora peered at it and saw the telltale signs of traces of magic organizing themselves around the crystal.

Not just a cane. As Tennora's staff had let her focus her energy and will, so did Dareun's cane improve its holder's grasp of magic. She held her expression as steady as she could, but she let her eyes dart to her staff resting in the corner beside the door.

"Very well, Dareun," she said. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

He made no move to stand. "That isn't how this is going to work, my dear girl."

"Oh?" she said lightly. He wasn't one of Master Hahnian's students, to be sure, nor had she seen him before at the House of Wonder. "You are quite demanding, saer, for someone who has broken into my home."

He smiled. His teeth were very white. "It is only fair," he said.

Oh Hells, she thought—the antiquary must have sent him. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Then you will likely also be surprised to hear that I'd like you to hand over my mask."

"I beg your pardon?" Tennora said, though her heart was racing. *It is not his to sell*, Aundra had said. The mask in the drawer seemed to be sending out signals like a lighthouse. *I'm here! I'm here!* She fought not to look at it. "Your mask? Perhaps you're looking for someone else."

"I know you took it." He stood and leaned on the walking stick rather heavily as he stepped closer to Tennora. His smell tickled its way through her nose and down her throat—brisk, bitter, and medicinal. "You and your ... friend," he said. "It's a fortunate thing that *my* friend Ferremo remembered your name and knew the right person to ask about you. You might have evaded me otherwise."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," Tennora said—what was that smell? Some sort of ointment? "I do not associate with criminals. I'm very sorry you're missing property"—A cheap scent?—"but I'm going to have to ask you to ... leave." With a sinking sensation, she realized what it was.

Chlorine.

That was the smell. Blurred by some other scent he wore, but that sharp, unpleasant odor was unavoidably chlorine.

Tennora closed her eyes. Pages of books flipped by her mind's eye, illustrated with graceful drawings of dragons: blue, gold, white, black, red, green. Coiled around a tree, in the illustration. *Marked by its distinctive crest and horn*, the text said, and—

Breathes poisonous gas.

A green dragon. Dareun was a dragon too.

No. Nestrix is not a dragon, Tennora reminded herself. She had just managed to know somehow that the shop owner would be a dragon ...

She opened her eyes. Dareun was watching her with an amused smile.

"Are you contacting her?" he said. "Tell her what I want. Tell her I'm going to take it and guarantee she never makes another play if she insists on being difficult."

The shop bells tinkled again. The seamstress held her gaze on the measuring tape at Nestrix's ankle.

"Well met," she called. "I'll be with you in a moment."

"It's quite all right," a man's voice said. "Take what time you need."

Nestrix froze and looked into the mirror. Over the shoulder of her reflection she saw a man with sleek blond

hair standing at the counter's table. The assassin from the antiquary's. The *lovac*.

He saw her watching him, and his eyebrows rose. A slow grin spread across his face. The seamstress finished her measurement, greeted the man, and slipped into the back to collect his garments.

"Well met, Mistress Blue," he said once the seamstress had gone. "Come around here often? Or did you notice my breeches the other night? Goodwoman Darvien is quite handy with a bolt of velvet."

Nestrix didn't move. The past still ached in her chest, and she was in no mood to suffer the little worm's insults. If she ignored him, she might not care.

"Or is it just to celebrate a good murder? Spend your victims' coin?"

"It's my coin," she said hotly.

He clucked his tongue. "Not even a protestation of innocence for form's sake?"

"Your men attacked me. What did you expect would happen?"

"I expected you would have known better," he said. "You've chosen the wrong people to antagonize. You *must* be mad to walk into our hands like that."

She turned at that. "I am not mad!" she growled.

His copper-capped teeth glinted in the light of the lamps. "Ah-ah! I find it's true that only the mad make such protestations. The sanity of the sane defends itself."

"Spoken like a swollen-headed buffoon," she replied. "Tell me, what platitudes do you speak to convince yourself that being the *lovac* of a wyrmling *taaldarax* is worth your precious time?"

He smirked. "My master may be young, but he's powerful indeed."

"I never thought I'd find a white who played *xorvintaal*," she said with her own smirk. "But I suppose it's unavoidably true, given his choice of agent. Did he choose you for your shiny hair?" The man's expression didn't change.

In fact, if possible, the *lovac*'s expression had grown even smugger.

Something made him think he had the upper hand.

"Tennora," she whispered.

Still wearing the pinned stormcloak, Nestrix slapped the payment down on the table. The *lovac* grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her close.

"What's your rush?" he said. "We were just starting to get along."

In answer, Nestrix balled her other fist and punched him squarely across the jaw.

He fell, and she stepped over him, wrapping the cloak around her as she ran, down Market Street and back to the God Catcher, clutching her knuckles and wishing once more for wings.

Ferremo stood uneasily and watched her bolt from the shop.

"Here we are," Goodwoman Darvien said, coming back into the front room. "I've—Good gods above! Goodman Magli, are you bleeding?"

Ferremo touched his rapidly swelling lip. His fingers came away red. "It appears I am. Never ask a woman her age, I suppose?" He pulled a square of silk from his pocket and held it to his lower lip. "It seems I'm needed back at the shop. Hold those for me for another hour, would you?"

The bells tinkled as he stepped outside, but the blue dragon was already lost in the crowds. Ferremo muttered a curse. He shouldn't have laid it on so heavily. Now she would interrupt his master, and Ferremo would catch the brunt of it.

"Coins bright, boss?" Ferremo spun around to see Alina leaning against the face of the seamstress's shop. "Ouch," she said, seeing his face. "That's quite a—"

"Enough," he snapped. "Things are getting out of hand." He pulled out a thick gold coin, a favor token, from his pouch. The magic in it would carry them back to the lair his master had chosen to favor—in this case, the antiquary's shop at the edge of the dragonward's power.

"Did he call?"

Ferremo narrowed his eyes. "No. This is ... preemptive."

"And so is this," Alina said. She reached into her vest and pulled out a slip of parchment. Ferremo took it from her, reading the lines of sepia ink.

Crimes: Murder of Ardusk Nagaenil.

The bold face of the blue dragon-woman in heavy lines.

Spellscarred. Do not approach alone.

"What is this?" he said.

"A handbill. There was a fellow, it seems, handing them out at the docks and gates. Apparently he's looking for her too." Alina leaned in close. "Only he says she's no dragon. Just some plague-addled goodwife."

"How would he know?" Ferremo said with a sneer.

"'Tis a fair question," Alina said. "But whatever proofs he's found, her *lovac* seemed very interested and—dare I say—troubled by them. They went a-walking for almost half an hour."

Ferremo frowned. That was interesting. But how could the *lovac* not know something so fundamentally *wrong* about her mistress? When he had been drawn, many years before, into Andareunarthex's schemes, his master had made a point of showing the young assassin the extent of his powers and what having connections to those powers could mean for Ferremo. Was the woman just stupid, or was there still more the two were hiding? If the bounty hunter had drawn Tennora into his plans, perhaps it was the blue dragon who was doing the hiding.

Ferremo considered the handbill. "Have you told the master this?"

Alina shook her head. "Not yet. One way or another, I think he wants her. Doesn't seem to matter much if she's a dragon pretending to be a woman or a woman pretending to

be a dragon. Though with the ward, the latter seems more likely."

Ferremo agreed and rethought his plans. "She's headed to him now," he said. With the dragonward sapping his master's strength, even if the blue dragon was only a spellscarred woman, he stood a chance of being hurt. Hells, even with only the *lovac* fighting back, Andareunarthex might be hurt. Ferremo worried one copper tooth with the tip of his tongue. Infiltrating Waterdeep still seemed like a poor plan, considering the power of the dragonward, even if his master insisted it was a trifling annoyance. If another player struck, they might be finished. He handed Alina the handbill.

"Has he called you?" Alina asked again.

"He will," Ferremo said, starting toward the address he had given the green dragon earlier that morning. "Come on."

"I think there's been a mistake," Tennora said. "I'm not who you think I am."

"No?" Dareun said. "Because right now I think you're the one who's going to lead me to the player that stormed into my hoard and stole my things. And I'd hate to be disappointed. Where is your *taaldarax*?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He sneered. "The dragon. Are you hers, or did the eladrin broker your skills?"

"Neither. I have no master."

"Do not lie to me," Dareun said. "The eladrin claimed you."

Tennora swallowed. "He's confused. I'm no longer Master Halnian's student."

"Then where is the dragon? And before you say you don't know who I mean," Dareun interrupted with a raised finger, "think carefully."

"I don't know where she is," Tennora said. "She left. She was angry I said I wouldn't help her any longer."

Dareun leaned on his cane. "I believe I told you not to lie to me. If you'd angered your *taaldarax*, you wouldn't be standing before me. You'd best convince her to return my mask to me," he said, leaning closer, "else I'll have to take you in her stead."

His threat fell apart into a fit of coughing that had Dareun bent nearly double for a span of breaths. He pressed a handkerchief to his mouth, and Tennora saw it was stained with spots of blood. His hand shook where it leaned on the cane, and for a brief moment it seemed he might be overwhelmed by the fit.

The dragonward—it was working. Fighting the effects of the mythal was slowly killing him. He might be weak enough for Tennora to stop him here and now.

She pulled the dagger from her belt.

He hadn't expected her to fight—Tennora could tell by the way his hands went to push her away without a spell or weapon in either. She slashed at his chest, cutting through the fine silk and scoring the skin beneath.

Dareun recovered enough to grab her arm and twist it roughly. She dropped the dagger and moved with the twist, pulling her arm up. She shoved her other elbow into his gut and stomped hard on his insole, just as Mardin had shown her. He shouted in surprise and let go of her long enough for Tennora to slip out of his grasp. She dashed to the door and pulled hard on the knob.

He raised his hand and the door slammed shut again.

Frantic, Tennora snatched her staff up from where she'd left it beside the door. Dareun was on her before she could bring a spell to mind. He reached for her throat.

She swung the staff, bashing his head, and ran for the window. The tip of her staff broke the shutters open ahead of her. "Help!" she shouted. "Help! Intruder!"

Potent, smothering dragonfear washed over her and buckled her knees. Her cries died in her throat. But whether it was exposure to Nestrix's rages or the effects of the blessed, blessed dragonward or the sharp pain in her knee as she fell, she pushed it off before it could settle in her heart. She had enough sense to fall aside as another spell stirred the air.

A bloom of dark energy burst into being. Its edge caught her, and a bone-chilling cold seized her arm and leg.

Tennora kicked the table over in time to deflect another dark and nasty spell. Her carvestars were in the kitchen drawer, her staff only a crutch for magic she fought to call to mind—unless he came closer. She whispered the words to a spell and popped her head over the edge of the table, long enough to let loose a few feeble darts of acid toward him.

One hit. The other two destroyed her shelf of chapbooks. Tennora shrieked.

So did Dareun—he was clutching his right arm where the blast had hit.

"*Dokaal* bitch," he shouted. Another blast of darkness took the corner of the table. Tennora seized the dangling table leg and wrenched it off.

She hurled it at him and struck his bad arm once more, then ducked behind the table, panting and clutching her staff and trying to ready a spell. She rubbed her aching knee.

Her neighbors had to be hearing this, she thought, her heart racing. Any minute now someone would burst in. Cassian was two floors away, she realized. He could be here in a second, wand blazing. Mardin might have heard her scream. Or maybe the smith down the hall. Or the tough old fishwife downstairs.

It was the middle of the day, she realized. Most of them were away.

Veron—Tennora reached into the apron pocket and fished out the token he'd given her.

She hurled it against the wall, and it shattered in a rain of fine sparks.

She popped her head over the table again to throw a gout of fire and sacrifice more of her beloved library, but found Dareun standing directly in front of her. He grabbed her by both wrists until she dropped the staff.

"I'm very sorry you made this decision," he said.

Tennora released the fire.

It was bigger than it should have been, and not as hot. The blowsy flames burst toward the ceiling, streaking past both their heads. Tennora pulled away, expecting the flames, and the worst of them singed Dareun's face. He screamed and released her, and she grabbed her staff and scrambled back toward the window.

"No!" Dareun barked. Tennora felt a chill in the air and he was suddenly behind her. Cold so deep it seared her skin emanated from the hands that clutched her shoulders. It seeped into her lungs and they ached.

"Where is your mistress?" he hissed.

Tennora jerked her staff toward her and cracked him hard on the side of the face, but he wouldn't let go. She hit him over and over, unable to draw up the focus for another spell, so long as that deep, black cold was pouring into her. Her knuckles ached as the chill filled her bones. Any moment ... she would drop.

"Tell me!" he shouted, shaking her.

The door banged open. Dareun turned to face the intruder, taking Tennora with him.

Nestrix's eyes were wild and glowing under the hood of a blue stormcloak. Her fingers curved into claws. She glanced at Tennora, at Dareun.

"Step away from that one, wyrmling," she snarled, pacing into the room. "She's not for you."

"Gladly." He let go of Tennora and she fell onto the windowsill. "She's not the one I want."

"I'm not your rival," Nestrix said. "Not yet. But you tempt me sorely, wyrmling."

Dareun's vicious smile grew, and he matched Nestrix's pace to keep the room between them. "Oh, the time for that has passed. You're in my territory, *myrnixae*."

She snarled something in Draconic and licked a canine as if testing its sharpness. "Your last chance to flee. I warn you."

Dareun raised his cane again, a spell taking shape.

Tennora lunged at him, trying to grab hold of his sleeve, to pull his arm away and disrupt the casting. Nestrix had no spells to cast, no weapons, she was helpless as—

Nestrix planted her feet, opened her mouth wide, and screamed.

A veritable storm, a swarm of lightning exploded out of Nestrix's throat. It raced across the room, crackling over Dareun's body. His screech of pain was drowned out by the thunder rippling behind it so loud that Tennora clapped her hands over her ears, just as the force of it threw her across the room and everything went black.

Ears ringing, Tennora opened her eyes and stood. Her home lay in ruins—her furniture shattered, her books torn and burned. Both Dareun and Nestrix lay crumpled on the floor. Dareun's fine clothes were turned to ash in many places, the skin angry red and even black at points. Nestrix's mouth was burned as well, blistering cruelly, and her cheeks were streaked with char. Both seemed as dazed as Tennora.

But Dareun was in better shape despite all that—there was a second man, the man from the antiquary's shop,

pouring a healing draught into his master's mouth. A man and a half-elf woman—both strangers—came in the door.

"That one," the man from the shop said, nodding at Nestrix.

"No!" Tennora shouted, though it came out like a wheeze. The three ignored her, and the half-elf held a rag to Nestrix's face. She thrashed against it, but only for a moment, and then went slack.

Tennora tried to clamber over the remains of her furniture, but her knee buckled and the blood on her hand made her grip slippery. They scooped Nestrix up by the ankles and shoulders and hauled her closer to Dareun and his lieutenant.

Tennora lurched to her feet and threw herself into the kitchen. Her carvestars—they were in the drawer with the mask. She had to—

"Tennora?" a voice called from the hallway. "Is everything all right?"

"Cassian!" she shouted back. "Hurry! Help!" The man from the antiquary's stood and drew his knife—

But he was too slow. Cassian burst through the door with a blaze of flames. The man with the knife threw up a ringed hand instead. An invisible barrier spread out to meet the fire, to throw it aside.

Another group of books went up in flames.

Tennora pulled the drawer right out of its frame, scattering papers and the mask in its case and all four of her carvestars. She plucked one up and hurled it at the

intruders. The flying blade pierced the half-elf woman's thigh. She cried out and stumbled.

Tennora pointed a finger and sent a burst of silver energy after it. A second followed, but collapsed onto the floor, scorching the wood.

Tennora cursed. She gathered up the carvestars.

Cassian waved his hands and sent a curtain of fire over the cluster of intruders. The half-elf dropped to the ground, but the man and the antiquary both cried out as the fire singed them.

So close, Tennora thought. She threw the carvestar and once again caught the antiquary. This time, though, the blade sank into his chest. He grunted, but managed to pull it free and fling it aside. Blood seeped across the silk of his shirt, and he pressed his hand to it.

Veron burst through the door behind Cassian, crossbow taut and loaded. He scanned the room, spotting Nestrix prone on the floor and then looking up at Tennora.

"Shoot him!" she shouted, pointing at the man with the knives.

"Lay down your arms!" Veron cried, raising the crossbow to his eye.

The man from the antiquary's shop spun another knife out of its sheath and hurled it at Veron. The bounty hunter threw up his crossbow and knocked the blade aside. He let fly a bolt, which struck the shoulder of the antiquary, who yelled a string of foul curses and clutched the bolt's shaft.

"Alina!" he shouted. "The favor! For the love of the gods, use the favor!"

The half-elf woman, still favoring her wounded knee, pulled out a coin a little larger than a platinum sun.

"No!" Tennora shouted, and threw herself at the half-elf woman. The coin flew from the woman's outstretched hand as she fell beneath Tennora. It spun lazily away.

The antiquary reached up and plucked it from the air. He gave Tennora and the half-elf a wicked grin. "Sorry ladies," he said. He spread his fingers and the token fell.

It clinked as it hit the floor, and before the sound had faded, Dareun, his servants, and Nestrix were gone.

All except the half-elf.

Veron strode across the room and pointed his crossbow down at her throat. "In accordance of the laws of Waterdeep, consider yourself under arrest and in my custody until the Watch arrive. I don't suggest you move."

ELEVEN

You," Veron said to Cassian, not taking his eyes off the half-elf. "Go fetch the hearthmaster and find a Watch patrol."

"Where did he take her?" Tennora said, gripping the half-elf by her shirtfront. "Where did they go?" The woman stared up at Tennora, still looking shocked.

"Tennora," Veron said sharply, "you need to get off her."

She ignored him and shook the half-elf. "Where did they go?" The woman squirmed and shook her head.

"She's not going to talk with you sitting on her chest," Veron said.

"Pardon me," Cassian said, "but who in the Nine Hells are you?"

"Veron Angalen. Go get the Watch."

"He's a bounty hunter," Tennora said.

"Why do you know a bounty hunter?" Cassian asked.

"Go get the Watch, Cassian!" Tennora shouted. After a moment of hesitation, she heard him sprint down the stairs.

"Tennora." Veron set a heavy hand on her shoulder. "I know you're upset. But you need to get up. Let me do my job."

Tennora looked up. His face was stern, but his golden eyes were gentle. Worried, even. She scowled back.

"Your job?" she said, climbing to her feet. "You mean the job where you convinced me to turn traitor on my *friend*? The job where you nearly got me killed assuming she was a liar? She saved my life and you'd have had me ... had me ..."

Veron suddenly yanked her behind him and trained the quarrel on the half-elf woman, who had sprung to her feet. "Goodwoman, I suggest you sit and put your hands on your head. I don't miss."

The woman's eyes darted toward the door, as if gauging the distance and the speed with which she could cross it. She set her hands on her head and went slowly to her knees. "I'm not worth your trouble," she said. "I don't know what he's doing. Besides, I was going to give you a hand with that dragon-woman, wasn't I?"

"You have a funny way of doing it," Veron said, still holding Tennora's arm.

Tennora shook herself free of him. "We have to find her. Where is she?"

The woman shrugged. "No idea."

"You were the one with the coin," Veron said. "Are you suggesting you carry teleportation tokens without knowing where they go?"

"*That* goes back to the shop. Your girl there could guess that much. But Ferremo's not an idiot. He'll get them somewhere safe before you ever get to the shop. And while I could guess, it's just as likely I've never been there. Didn't even know Ferremo worked for a dragon 'til last tenday. Also," she added, "I'm not an idiot either. I'll take you two ready to flay me over Ferremo and the master any day."

"We'll see what the Watch has to add," Veron said. He turned to Tennora. "I've been here before. We'll have to wait for them to resurface."

"He won't let her resurface, you fool!" Tennora cried. "He's not helping her escape: he means to kill her."

A rush of footsteps came up the stairs and Mardin burst through the broken door, red-faced and short of breath.

"Holy gods," he said, "Tennora. Mask's empty casket, you—did they hurt you? You're burned. Sit down." "You sit down," Tennora said. "You look like you're going to have a fit." The shock was wearing off, pain starting to pulse along her nerves. Mardin turned a chair upright and gestured to her to sit, his shoulders still heaving.

"Sit, petal, please," he said. "Ah, all the gods, how could I let this happen?"

Tennora pursed her lips but sat. Mardin seemed to spot Veron for the first time.

"You!" Mardin said. "What have you done? I ought—"

"Mardin, he had nothing to do with this," Tennora said, a bit harshly. "And you couldn't have done anything to help."

"Well, I might have kept the worst of it away," Mardin said. "I might be old, but I know a thing or two."

So do I, Tennora added silently. It was something everyone in the room seemed to be forgetting.

"There were two dragons in here fighting," Tennora said.

"No there weren't," Veron said.

"Yes, there were," the half-elf said.

Tennora turned in her seat. "Truly, Mardin, there was nothing to have stopped it. You'd be just as battered as I."

"Petal, dear, you're—"

Another rush of footsteps and the remnants of the door opened again, this time for Cassian and a trio of Watchmen. The captain stepped forward, short sword out, eyes on Veron.

"Hold and down weapons, you," he shouted.

"I'm not the intruder!" Veron snapped.

"Down arms!"

"I beg your pardon!" Tennora shouted. All three Watchmen turned to look at her. She stood and pulled her shoulders back, despite the pain that raced down her spine, and regarded them like the brighter-nose noble they thought she was. She was sick and tired of being overlooked and stepped over, and she wasn't about to let it happen once more.

"Lady Hedare," the captain said with some surprise. He didn't lower his sword. "This young man says you've had an intruder and a couple of—"

"Captain, the woman is the intruder. I expect you'll take *my* word for it."

His sword dropped by a hand's length. "As you say, saer."

"She assaulted *me!*" the half-elf cried. "You're in her home," Veron said.

The captain cleared his throat. "Do allow my asking, saer, but what *are* you doing so far from the North Ward?"

Tennora began to retort, but the familiar sound of flapping wings made her fall silent. She watched as Aundra Blacklock once more climbed in through her window, her massive, bone white wings trailing behind.

Aundra looked Tennora over, examining her burned face and bleeding shoulder, the bruising that swelled up over her collarbone. She jerked her head back and took a small flask off her belt, setting it into Tennora's hands without a word. Stalking into the kitchen, she picked her way over the burned books and the scraps of wood that had once been Tennora's table. In the middle of the kitchen she squatted, nudged aside a few tatters of paper and bits of trash, and plucked out the case with the golden mask. She set it on the bureau. Everyone stared at her.

"What are the Watch doing here?" she said.

The captain recovered himself. "Goodwoman Blacklock, your, ah ... Lady Hedare reported someone came in and, well, seems to have destroyed the place."

Aundra looked at the half-elf. "Are you the perpetrator?" "I perpetrated nothing," the half-elf said.

"She was here when I arrived," Veron said. "Her master and others helped a dangerous criminal escape."

"Ah," Aundra said. She turned her lamplike eyes to the Watch. "It sounds like she is your problem now."

With much staring and apologizing, the Watchmen took custody of the half-elf, shackling her arms and leading her down the stairs. As she passed Tennora, she smirked, as if she had gotten exactly what she wanted. No one spoke until the Watch's footsteps had faded.

"It seems everything went according to plan." Aundra glanced around the damaged room without so much as blinking. "More or less. I expected it to be quieter."

"What?" Tennora cried. "What plan were you going by?"

"I have my mask." Aundra laid a covetous hand on the case. "And you have come out alive." "You don't understand! The antiquary's shop was a dragon hoard. The dragon came here and they ... they fought, and he ... He took Nestrix!"

Aundra turned a cold yellow eye on her. "Yes, I know. I know all that."

Tennora fell back a step. "You knew he was a dragon? You sent us in anyway?"

Aundra took the mask out of the box and held it up to the candlelight. The light danced over the edges of the feathers. "What's the best way to fight a dragon?" she said dreamily.

"A casting of ... meteor swarm?" Cassian ventured as if it were a test. Aundra turned and frowned at him, as if she were only just noticing he was there.

"Another dragon," Mardin said, folding his arms over his chest and frowning.

"Yes, Goodman Eftnacost. Why put yourself in harm's way, when their pride and rage will take care of it for you? At

least one of them will no longer be a factor. One is easier to deal with than two.

Especially when that one is wounded." She looked at Tennora again, with a jerky nod of her head. "And I appreciate your help in that, Lady Hedare."

"How could you?" Tennora said, too battered and exhausted to stop the tears that welled up in her eyes. "She asked for your help."

"How could I not? They are, neither of them, paragons of virtue. How could *you* bring one into my building?" she said. "You brought vultures into this city." "

Tennora met her cold eyes. "We brought the vultures out"—for the first time, Aundra's flat expression flickered—"for good or ill, and that is better than letting Dareun plot under everyone's noses. She just wanted her life back."

"So she can murder and steal and manipulate us all?" Aundra clicked her tongue. "You are young still and haven't learned to see past the lies they all tell. The dragon can't escape her true nature. No one can." "What do you know about her nature?" Tennora cried. "All you know is that her scales were blue."

"Tennora, calm down," Mardin said.

"Blue dragons can be reasonable," Aundra said, "but they're volatile creatures. You cannot trust them in the end, any more than a green or a red or a black or a white. They all hunger for destruction. Between the two of them they would tear this city's heart out if they could. Drink your tonic."

"You judge her too harshly!"

Aundra's feathers swelled, but she gave no other sign of her anger. "This is my home as well, girl. I do what I must to protect Waterdeep."

"She's part of Waterdeep," Tennora said. "She came here, didn't she? Same as you, same as any of us."

"That doesn't mean she's welcome."

"Who are you to decide that?" Tennora surged to her feet. Veron caught her arm.

Aundra picked up the case with the mask in it and shifted her hands over it in a complicated pattern. It vanished with a soft pop.

"A better judge than you, my dear," she said sadly, and crossed back to the window. "Oh yes." Aundra looked back over her shoulder. "She offered you a ritual? One that would improve your magical abilities?"

"She did," Tennora said warily.

Aundra smiled. "It doesn't exist."

With that she leaped into the night with a great flap of her wings, and Tennora collapsed onto her mother's trunk.

Mardin cleared his throat. "I'll make some tea."

"There, there," Cassian said, sitting down beside her. "I'm sure we can clean all of this up in no time at all."

Tennora ignored him and turned to Veron. "What are we going to do?"

He shrugged. "Wait her out."

"And what about him?"

"What about him?"

"We have to do something," Tennora said. "If either of them needs to be taken out of the city, it's Dareun."

Veron shook his head. "We don't know anything about him. It's too risky."

"You'd rather leave a pair of warring dragons—one of whom is clearly up to something—"

"I told you before, it's a spellscar. She isn't a dragon."

"She breathed lightning!"

"And it's probably her spellscar," Veron said. "Or a spell she learned."

There *were* spells for that, but Tennora had never seen one throw out such a huge amount of lightning or seen anyone do it who wasn't a wizard through and through. And she'd never heard of a spellscar that gave the afflicted so many powers. She thought of the look in Dareun's eye when Nestrix entered, of the way he'd said he didn't want Tennora.

"The other dragon recognized her," Tennora said. "Why would he take her if she's just spellscarred?"

Cassian patted her hand. "That was a man, not a dragon."

"Men don't smell like chlorine," she said. "He's a dragon. He's the *taaldarax*!" Suddenly the pieces fell together in Tennora's mind. "Oh gods."

"What?" Veron said.

"He's ..." She looked up at Veron. "I know what it means. *Taaldarax*. The man with the copper caps called Nestrix a player and Nestrix said ... Dareun is a *xorvintaal* dragon."

"*Xorvintaal* is a myth," Cassian said gently. But Veron's countenance became thoughtful.

"They say the dragons who play the great game take pains not to be seen," he said. "Whatever he is or isn't, this fellow walked right into your apartment and tried to kill you. Fairly obvious."

Tennora shook off Cassian and stood. "I spent a few short songs with him, and I know he's an arrogant hawksnarl and was ready to kill me over being robbed of a trinket. And Nestrix called him a wyrmling. He might be young. He might be new to the game. He might be a reckless player."

"Tennora," Cassian said, taking her by the shoulders. "The great game is a legend made up by adventurers who've seen one too many smart beasts."

"Cassian, if you don't stop touching me right now—"

"Enough," Mardin said. "Neither of you are helping."

Tennora buried her face in her hands, if just to grant herself a moment to think. She had to do something, and quickly.

But she was alone. Aundra wasn't going to help her. Veron might, but he'd turn around and take Nestrix back to Cormyr to stand trial—and he'd tell her so as soon as they found her. Dareun could only appreciate them announcing their arrival with the fight that would inevitably result. Mardin was afraid she might skin her knees or give herself nightmares. Worse, if he tried to come along, he was likely to

do something rash in order to protect her, and give himself a fit and collapse. She couldn't lose him too.

And Cassian ...

Cassian wasn't listening to a word she said. He was patting her shoulder again and suggesting she drink her tea and be thankful the problem took care of itself. Two days ago she would have been thrilled he was there, trying to soothe her. Now she wanted him out of her home. She couldn't rely on Cassian. She couldn't rely on any of them to trust her.

In fact, the only person she could rely on was the person she needed to save.

She looked up.

It wasn't a thought she'd expected to have, but there it was. She could count on Nestrix, who screamed in the rain, who boiled with dragonfear, who'd threatened Tennora's life.

Who gave me her eggshell, she thought. Who said I could do better than Cassian. Who saved my life.

The absence of the eggshell was a palpable thing. She pressed a fist to her chest where it had hung for two days.

She had to save Nestrix.

"You two shoo," Mardin said, stirring up the fire. "Give her some space."

Veron frowned at her. "I'll stay by the door," he said. "Outside. They might come back."

Tennora gave him a pleasant, false smile. "That would be very kind of you."

He held her gaze a moment longer, as if trying to tease her true thoughts out of the placid facade. She held the expression with a vengeance, her thoughts secret and racing.

After both had left, Tennora crossed over to the window and leaned against the sill, looking down at the face of the God Catcher and willing it to come to life once more. To tell her what she could do, how she could fix things. It merely stared back with its one stone eye.

She was on her own.

Mardin came over with a cup of tea and pulled the chair closer. The steam from the mug was fragrant with rose petals and bitter Chessenta black. Tennora sipped it, still quiet.

"So," Mardin said. "Your first adventure didn't quite turn out."

"No."

"Doesn't usually. My first try I ended up walking in on some old lord, his wife, and their page." He shook his head. "Losing a few trinkets is one thing. Losing your privacy like that, well, I had to get out of there fast and lie low. Not much compared to upsetting a dragon, but there you are."

Tennora knew she was supposed to laugh, but she couldn't. "It's not all gnolls and saving fair maidens, then?"

"Never was," Mardin said. "Shouldn't have let you think it was. I'm sorry she never told you the truth, petal. And I'm sorry I didn't either. But you're not her, you know. You're your own person, and you don't have to follow your mother to know that. Go back to your books. That's your place."

"No," she said. "Master Hahnian's let me go."

A moment of silence. "Ah," Mardin said.

Tennora set her mug on the floorboards beside her. "I don't feel like talking just now," she said. "What I'd really like ..." She paused, very deliberately, feeling guilty at playing Mardin like her aunt and uncle. "I just want to wash all of this away. I'd really like to visit the baths for an hour or so—do you think you could see if Veron would follow me, in case they do come back? I'd ask, but ... I don't want to give the wrong idea." "Of course, petal," Mardin said, giving her a kiss on the forehead. "Nothing simpler."

"I'll just get my things together."

Once Mardin had gone, Tennora quickly stood and opened her mother's trunk.

The smell of beeswax and tallow rose up in a cloud as she removed the tray and one by one withdrew the leathers and laid them in an open apron. She tied the apron into a bundle and tucked it under her arm. She picked up her carvestars and tucked them into her pouch, then slipped the dagger into its sheath and took up her staff.

Outside the storm clouds grew darker and heavier with the rain. Despite being hardly past tharsun, it looked as if the sun had retreated for the evening.

It would be dangerous—but that thought rose up and fell away, leaving no mark on her decision. She left the God Catcher.

Veron seemed to sense she was in no mood for conversation and walked silently several paces behind her. It gave her a chance to think.

There was no chance she could find Nestrix and rescue her alone without a little leverage. The only connection she knew of was the antiquary's shop, and the woman had said flat out they wouldn't be there.

"A greedy, sloppy dragon," Nestrix had said. Tennora thought of the treasures, so many amazing things stacked up in that antechamber. Perhaps she could offer a trade? Her mother's keepsakes for Nestrix's life.

No—he was too angry. A few trinkets wouldn't do it.

The key is the singer's collar, the statue had said. *The lodestone is the first lord's gift.*

"The singer's collar," Tennora said aloud. The back of her neck prickled. The Songdragon's gorget. Invaluable, beautiful—and he would take it because of its powers and never ask questions. She felt dizzy with success. She could save Nestrix.

But first she needed to get away. First she needed to look like someone who could make such a bold offer.

At the Queen of Hearts bathhouse, Tennora turned to face Veron. "Will you wait here?" she asked.

He looked along the street and pointed with his chin at a nearby tavern. "I'll draw less notice there. How long will you be?"

Tennora shrugged. "An hour." Let him wait, she thought.

He started to say something, then seemed to take stock of her expression. He nodded and headed for the tavern. Tennora entered the marble building, paid her donation to

the heartwarder at the door, and found herself a dressing alcove. She unwrapped the pieces of armor.

Black, soft, and tooled with graceful curls and whorls—time had hardly touched them. Tennora unwrapped the bracers and the greaves, flexing the material in her hands. Still pliable.

She stripped down to her smallclothes and pulled on the pieces one by one.

The boots were loose and the vambraces snug. The high-collared cuirass fit smoothly over her torso, laced tight around her neck, and buckled with only a little trouble to the harness and the leggings. Each piece, each step, she felt as if she were donning another person's skin, another person's self. She wasn't a thief. She wasn't the Shadow Wind. But in her mother's leather armor, she might be something close. She bound her hair back in a tight braid.

She took the belt she had worn over her skirts—a dusty brown, heavily stitched piece of fabric that dripped with loops and pouches for components—and found places for her picks and carvestars and her mother's dagger, before tying it around her waist. She slid the staff through the back harness meant for a short sword and adjusted it so she could move easily.

Wrapping herself in her stormcloak and pulling up the hood, she slipped back out the door. She didn't dare look up to see if Veron had spotted her, but when his voice didn't call down the street, her shoulders relaxed a little and she pushed back the hood.

As she passed the window of a shop, she caught a glimpse of herself. The stormy sky beyond made her

reflection clear as a looking glass, and she was surprised at what she saw.

She looked as if she knew what she was doing.

All the shops along Jembril Street were shut for evenfeast, the lamps turned low, the clerks all shut away in their back rooms. On the door of the antiquary's shop, a small hand-lettered sign had been pasted.

Closed, the sign said, for a family emergency. Please call again in a tenday.

Tennora cracked the lock much more quickly than the previous time. They'd reset it, but not replaced it, and the cylinders moved just as they had before. She slipped inside and shut the door behind her.

Not a body stirred in the seed hoard. Not a sound came from the rooms beyond. Fine, she thought. If they aren't here, I'll bring them here.

The heavy iron urn she'd knocked off the cabinet still rested on the floor. She kicked it over onto its side once more and then rolled it onto the pressure plate with another kick. As it hit the plate, the acid bursts splattered down on it, as expected, and she felt the rush of the alarm triggering—quiet as a breeze, but somewhere, for someone, the alarm was screaming that the treasure was no longer safe.

She sat down on a chest and waited for that someone to turn up.

It took little time. There was a rustle in the shadows at the far end of the building, as if a door had opened, and the

man she'd mistaken for an antiquary appeared at the edge of the light from the glowballs, knives out. He eyed her for a moment and, satisfied she didn't present an immediate threat, stepped closer.

"Robbing my shop?" He looked her over once more and frowned. "Again." "You work for Dareun," she said. "*Lovac*. I assume you're Ferremo. Do you have a proper name?"

The man's eyes narrowed, but he didn't throw the knife. If Dareun thought Nestrix was a player, he had to think Tennora was one of her minions. Perhaps, like the man with the knives, her chief minion. Her *lovac*.

"It's Magli," he said. "Ferremo Magli. You?"

"You know my name," she said with a smile.

"Why are you here?"

"He has my mistress," she said. "And I'd like her back. But you and I both know he won't listen to a nothing like me. So I came to make you an offer. An offer he might prefer, if he heard it from the right source."

He smiled. "Does your mistress give up *her* gains so easily? He'll not give her back without a fight."

"I have something he'd like very much."

"What? Alina? Between you and me, he's better off without her."

Tennora smiled back. "You mean you're better off without her." She'd seen the way he'd sneered at the half-elf as he dropped the token. "I can get him something much better."

"I doubt that," he said. "He's very interested in your mistress. So interested he won't consider the fact that she's a fraud. Oh yes," he said, when Tennora's eyes widened. "I'm well aware of the bounty hunter. It was the last useful thing Alina did. Pity I'm going to have to arrange for her ... disposal."

Tennora ignored the baiting. "So why not save him some time? Give her to me."

Ferremo shrugged, as if she'd asked him why he hadn't worn a yellow shirt—it didn't matter. "If she's a dragon, he'll want to know how she's avoided the dragonward."

"And if she isn't?"

He laughed. "Humans don't deserve the powers of the dragons. He'll make her understand that."

"Sounds like a waste of his time. And yours."

Ferremo flipped his dagger over his knuckles and caught it again. "What are you offering?"

"A relic," she said, "of the time before the Wailing Years. A collar worn by the Songdragon, to protect her from the dragonward if anyone ever took hold of Ahghairon's staff."

Ferremo's eyebrow twitched. "It protects against the dragonward?" Tennora nodded. "Where is it?"

"Ah-ah." Tennora wagged a finger at him. "I will get it for you in exchange for Clytemorrenestrix. Safe and alive."

"Of course you will," he said, and folded his arms over his chest. "Where is it? Under your linens?"

"It happens to be in the care of a powerful wizard," Tennora said, though she was trying hard not to think of that part. "A master of the House of Wonder. Rhinzen Halnian."

At the name, a light seemed to flare to life behind Ferremo's eyes, and his cold demeanor thawed. He set his hands on his hips and regarded Tennora with a curious smile.

"Rhinzen Halnian?" he asked. "Tymora must be laughing."

She nodded, with a little smile of her own, as if they were sharing a joke. He clearly thought they were. "He hasn't done me any favors lately," she said vaguely.

"He doesn't think much of us and our ilk," Ferremo said.

Her heart was pounding. Ferremo knew Rhinzen, which meant her old master might have been harmed by the dragon and his *lovac*.

Or he's been helping them, she thought.

"I can't make any promises," Ferremo said. "Especially since there's no proof she's a player. Or even a dragon."

Tennora raised her eyebrows skeptically. "Do you want to take chances?"

"It's what we do," Ferremo said with an edge of menace. "Get the relic from that high-minded long-ears, and I'll have an answer for you."

"Tomorrow evening," Tennora said, and the assassin agreed.

"Rough him up for me, and I'll see about finding you a place with a real *taaldarax*," he said. "And since I know where you live, I can trust you'll let yourself out." He turned and vanished into the shadows.

Tennora let out the breath she'd been holding. She wasn't dead. She had a plan. The man with the knives wasn't overly suspicious—and why should he be? She'd managed to convince him he was getting a treasure beyond worth.

Now came the difficult part.

TWELVE

The tower of Rhinzen Halnian rose up into the night, a pillar of rose-colored granite with delicate buttresses. Tennora could not help thinking, as she eyed it from the shadow of a barberry bush, that three days ago, she had come and gone here as easy as she pleased, never considering how lucky that made her.

The tower itself was ringed by a high wall with only one gate, guarded by four moon elves, well armored and well equipped with spells and weapons both. She'd slipped past them by scaling the wall near the gardener's shack. They were mostly there to deter unwanted guests—to out-and-out prevent their entry, the tower had more reliable and magical guardians.

She doubted that Master Halnian had changed the spells to enter by the front door, and she planned on slipping in that way. But after that she would have to be careful. She was an intruder.

That truth nagged at her as she sat waiting for the last of her former classmates to file out of the tower.

Or you could go home, a part of her thought, and she knew it had a point. What was becoming of her that she was attempting her second burglary in as many days? And this time at the home of someone who had taken her under his wing and ...

Promptly thrown her out, another part added.

There wasn't another way to save Nestrix.

She pulled her stormcloak close and strode across the gardens toward the entry.

The storm clouds of the afternoon had finally broken up. Thousands of stars littered the night sky, and Selune shone among her court, a queen in a silver crown.

She kept her hood low and her cloak closed as she approached the grand double doors that led into the tower. Two massive stone griffons, rearing rampant, guarded the doorway. Though they looked like mere—if marvelously carved—statues, the night showed that their eyes glowed faintly blue. They were golems created by Master Halnian and charged with protecting his home and study from intruders.

Over and around the two griffons, the gossamer web of a warding spell stretched across the entryway. Invited or accompanied guests could come and go as they pleased. Elsewise, a rain of ice would fall from the ward, entombing the unwelcome and holding their bodies in place for the griffons or the Watch—whoever came first.

It was the only way in, unless she could scale the sheer walls—and even then while the windows would let objects out, they were warded against things coming in. She briefly imagined clinging to the edge of a windowsill by her fingernails while trying to unravel the ward. It might be safer than the griffons.

There was a chance that Master Halnian had not removed her from the list of persons who could pass through the ward unaccompanied, and it was not a chance Tennora felt good about taking. If she'd had any other options, she would have gladly gone with them instead.

The griffons seemed to watch her as she approached, sending a chill through her that presaged the ice. She took a breath to calm herself and continued her measured pace toward the doors.

Nearly there, Tennora's legs started to shake so hard they could barely carry her. Stone creaked as the griffons turned their heads ever so slightly toward her.

She didn't dare stop—her legs would certainly buckle beneath her and draw the attention of the guards. And the griffons, the griffons ...

The griffons flexed their claws into the stone floor of the entryway.

Tennora closed her eyes and kept walking, ready to feel the sting of ice with every breath. Four steps up to the entry and she quickened her pace, hurrying toward the doors.

They clacked their stone beaks.

The air stilled and grew chilly, frost spreading across her cloak. She leaped forward, reached out a hand toward the doors.

With a soft groan, they opened for her.

As her feet hit the marble floor of the entrance hall, Tennora finally allowed herself to breathe. A glance back at the griffons showed they were once again staring at each other and no one else. Tennora brushed the frost from her shoulders—it was as if they had known she didn't belong, even if clearly no one had told them she was no longer welcome. She pulled off her cloak, balled it up, and stuffed it into the sack she had tied to her belt—it would serve as decent batting until she handed the gorget over to Ferremo.

A chorus of voices, piping up one by one out of her memories, had been berating Tennora from the moment she escaped the God Catcher. As she ascended the staircase of Master Halnian's tower, they rose to a howl.

"How can you do this to someone who took you in?" Aunt Aowena wailed. "How can you betray Master Halnian?"

"This will come down on all of us!" Uncle Eckhart said. "Shame on you!"

Her father's sad voice floated up. "This is not the path for you. You know better."

Mardin's voice said, "The life of a thief is no grand thing. You do this, you won't be able to escape it. Turn back while you can."

Tennora rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand, warm from the leathers and from climbing the stairs—and from the fear and the concern unfolding inside of her. They were right—*she* was right. This would only end up hurting her in the end. And who was to say she could even pull it off? She'd picked the locks on two doors in her lifetime; chances were good she wouldn't be able to pick Master Halnian's display case.

She looked around the empty landing, a place she'd stood more times than she could count but had never truly noticed before. The door on the tower side led into the library, where she'd spent most of her long apprenticeship.

In the momentary quiet of Tennora's thoughts, a new thought rose up, clear and unhurried. It sounded like her mother's voice.

"You do what you can and what you must," it said. "Don't let them know what you want."

No one else was going to save Nestrix. No one else knew how.

She started up the stairs again.

Master Halnian's office was on the fourth floor, facing the harbor. The door was unlocked, and Tennora slipped inside without anyone noticing.

The lights were low—only the small glowballs caged inside the shelves that held Master Halnian's treasured items, and a brazier lambent with dying embers. The moonlight cast everything in shades of gray, and Tennora was very grateful she knew the room as well as she did.

Behind the divan were the glass-shuttered shelves that held Master Halnian's prized treasures—among them the gorget of the Songdragon.

Tennora crossed the room on tiptoes and slipped behind the divan. She traced the keyholes on the case that held the gorget—they were sturdy brass locks. A little shallow. Maybe eight pins deep. She unrolled her case on the floor and selected a wire with a curve so gentle it lay flat against the center of her palm.

The gorget of the Songdragon perched a wooden stand, glistening in the light of a glowball. It was only a part of the armor enchanted for the fabled Songdragon, a shape-changing dragon who had secretly resided in Waterdeep and come to the city's aid after the Spellplague, but it had been a crucial piece: the gorget held the enchantment that prevented Ahghairon's dragonward from taking hold and sapping the Song Dragon's strength.

Despite the fact the gorget had been created during the unpredictable period after the first wave of the Spellplague, the enchantment was solid and still worked. The negative effects that imbued so many of the artifacts from that time were minor and well-established, and so long as the Song Dragon hadn't gone flying in her armor at the end of summer, she was safe.

Behind her, the doorknob turned.

Tennora dropped to the floor as the door opened. Behind the divan, she watched Master Halnian's slippered feet pad across the room to the desk on the side of the room opposite her. She dared not breathe as he dropped a stack of books onto the desk, then flipped through them and rifled papers. He gave a little frustrated grunt and walked back to the door.

He tugged the bellpull there, and Tennora took advantage of the sound to pull her knees up and shuffle against the divan. Her pulse was beating mercilessly against her ears, so loud she was certain Master Halnian would hear it.

The door opened again. "Take these back to the library," she heard Master Halnian say. "And bring me ..." He sighed. "No, never mind. I'm finished for today. Go finish your tasks and go home."

"Yes, master," a voice said. Tennora winced—it was Cassian. Damn it—she'd have to get out past him too. The door closed, but Master Halnian remained. Tennora shifted to the corner of the divan, a place more deeply in shadow, and watched between its legs.

Master Halnian sighed again noisily and started around the desk. Stopped. Sighed again. He opened the drawer

closest to him and withdrew a small bag. She heard him inhale deeply as if smelling the contents.

He tossed the bag in his hand for a moment as if weighing it. "Just the once," he finally said.

He walked back around the desk, heading for the divan. A brazier full of lambent coals rested beside it on the side farthest from Tennora. She pressed herself against the back of the divan, willing herself to take up less space, to be less noticeable.

She heard Master Halnian mutter, and the coals in the brazier crackled to life with little effort from his cantrip.

Tennora shifted enough to peer around the end of the divan. He was holding the bag still, considering it as if it held a puzzle. After a few breaths, he set the bag in the brazier and lay down on the divan with another heavy sigh.

"Just the once," he muttered again as the fire ate into the edges of the bag. Smoke began to billow up out of the brazier, thick and faintly blue.

The smoke flowed downward, coiling along the floor, smelling meaty and faintly of pinesap. She fought the cough that rose in her chest and took a long, slow breath.

Tennora's spine prickled, then her arms and the back of her head. Her lids felt heavy. Quickly unlacing the bag from her belt, she wadded sack and stormcloak against her mouth and nose.

Even still, she felt the smoke curl around her brain.

She didn't want to simply touch the enchanted weapons and jewels that lined the shelves any longer—she'd rather

devour them, seize them in both fists and draw everything out of them, learn their deepest secrets. She felt spells she hadn't thought of in tendays crowding into her memory, waiting to be spoken—but evaporating as quickly as they surged forward.

She pressed the burlap more firmly against her face.

Son of a barghest, she thought. The smoke was a magic enhancer.

A minor class of intoxicants, but one that made for interesting study—magic enhancers made it easier to cast spells and gave one access to more power. Usually short-lived, usually overflowing with side effects, they were hard to obtain. And hard to hide.

The confusion of the moment was rapidly subsumed by anger.

She was the one unsuited to the Art? *She* was the one who couldn't properly do magic? Rhinzen Hahnian, Master of the House of Wonder, was enhancing his spells and calling *her* a waste of time. Telling her it was for the good of the city that *she* be released from study.

Gods, what a mess, she thought, glaring up at the ceiling. What an utter mess.

The sound of his breathing slowed, shuddering in and out of him as if his lungs were trembling.

Tennora longed to gasp in air for him. But it meant he was asleep or entranced, or at the least unconscious. She moved very carefully to her feet.

Rhinzen lay insensate, his eyes twitching feverishly beneath their lids. Blood flushed his cheeks, and his lips were slightly parted, drying on the wind of his breath. He didn't react to Tennora's movement, but she stood watching the rise and fall of his chest for as many breaths as she could bear before turning back to the case.

She took a deep breath through the cloth and held it, before dropping the bag and pulling the picks out of her belt.

The cabinets were locked, but not warded—no one could enter the tower without passing through the wards at the doors. Master Halnian's only concern would be overzealous students. The locks were well made and sturdy, but Tennora worked quickly and quietly.

The gorget's moonstone sparkled lavender, indigo, and silver. She lifted it gently off the stand. Nothing went off—no alarms, no traps—and she breathed a sigh of relief.

She had it.

Master Halnian stirred, grazing consciousness enough to mumble half the words of a spell. Tennora froze, but the magic sputtered and the spell failed. Master Halnian twitched and slipped back into sleep.

With the drug in him, Master Halnian was as good as a trap. The longer she stayed, the more likely she was to get caught by his mumblings. Gorget still in hand, Tennora crept back out of the room, easing the latch shut with the softest of clicks.

Just like that, she was out. A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth, unbidden. She had done it. She yanked the opening of the bag wide.

Footsteps raced up the stairs. Tennora spun around and threw her back against the slight recess of the door. She winced at the thud, but Master Halnian didn't stir.

The slap of sandals came closer, and Cassian appeared before her. He skidded to a halt, looking guilty. Then he seemed to realize Tennora didn't belong there.

"Tennora?" Cassian said, looking her over, bewildered. "What are you wearing? What are you doing here?" He looked down at the gorget, halfway into her haversack. "Is that ...?"

"Cassian," she said in warning tone. "This isn't your concern."

"Tennora, whatever you think you're doing, it's a very bad idea." Cassian reached for the sack. She pulled it out of his reach and stepped into the hall.

"This *isn't* your concern."

"Cassian?" a third voice called. A slim young woman, an elf with black hair to the middle of her back, came up the stairs with a bottle of zzar in her hand. Another apprentice—Shava. "What are you—" Spotting Tennora, she froze. "Oh." "Oh indeed," Tennora said. "Looks like I'm not the only one breaking rules."

Shava hid the zzar behind her back. Cassian blushed. "There is a world of difference between taking some drink and taking a priceless artifact. Give me the sack."

Tennora took a step back. "Not a chance. I need it."

"Tennora, this isn't like you," Cassian said. "You're a *good* girl. You don't steal from Master Halnian. You don't keep up

with people like that ... that Nester woman. What changed? Where's the old Tennora?"

Tennora laughed, mostly at herself. "Cassian, please. I have an appointment to keep."

When she started to leave, Cassian moved in front of her. "I'm better than you at spells," he said. "Don't make me stop you."

"I'm not going to *make* you do anything," Tennora replied, and kept walking. Cassian grabbed her arm.

"I'll tell your aunt," he said.

Tennora looked down at his hand on her arm, appalled that she'd ever thought highly of him. "Are we in the nursery? So you'll tell my aunt—who do you think she'll believe? Who do you think she'll want to believe?" She shook him off. "Let me tell you something about noble families, Cassian, because it might come in handy someday when you're a wand for hire. When it's our business, we can be at each other's throats. When it comes from outside, we're a wall you can't break. She won't believe you because it's better you're a jealous liar. Besides"—she smiled bitterly—"who'd ever believe poor, sweet Tennora was capable of anything like robbery?"

Behind him, Shava had set the bottle of zzar down, moving with slow care. She brought her hands up and started the movements of a spell—not one Tennora knew, but an attack spell, clearly. Tennora was careful not to let on that she'd noticed, and counted the beats of Shava's casting.

Wait, she thought. Wait.

Cassian stepped back. "You won't get away with this."

She sighed. "And you'll probably never forgive me for this. Sorry, Cass." She grabbed him by the arm and swung him between her and Shava just as the spell went off. Shava shrieked and tried at the last moment to redirect the force, but it was too late. Cassian took the brunt of the concussion of sound, though its edge crashed into Tennora. Her legs quivered, her ears throbbed, and she felt as if moving would pitch her forward through the floor and down into the Abyss itself. She edged toward the stairs as Shava rushed to Cassian, who lay even more dazed and shaken on the floor.

By the time Tennora had gotten one foot balanced on the top stair and shaken the sensation that she would fall, Shava had managed to get Cassian to his feet. He leaned heavily on the elf girl.

"Tennora—" he started.

The door banged open. Master Halnian, eyes wild and body swaying, took in the three of them. His face was flushed, and his eyes focused on spots that held no one and nothing. His robe was torn open at the collar, and the muscles on his pale and fine-boned chest stood out, sinewy and taut as ropes.

"Master Halnian," Cassian said, "thank goodness. We have a very serious problem—"

Master Halnian answered with a howl like a beast's that collapsed into a string of nonsense. "Never never and the blood of the moon is so black!" he cried. All three students took a step backward, away from the master.

"Master Halnian?" Shava asked. "Are you—"

"Stop the fires! Stop the *burning!*" he cried. The air between his hands burgeoned with a spell that shivered and wavered. "You'll not needle me, devils! I have the body and the blood and the might of the goddess! Don't drink me! Don't needle me!"

The spell flashed blue. Master Halnian raised his hands over his head. "You'll not needle me!"

"Get down!" Tennora shouted, and pushed Shava and Cassian to the ground just before a ball of lightning exploded out from Master Halnian's hands. As with Nestrix's breath, the lightning threw her backward.

She pulled herself to her feet. Her ears were ringing, and she fought to find her way away from the drug-addled spells of her former eladrin.

Master Halnian sprang at her with a scream and knocked her back down, driving the wind from her lungs. His slender hands gripped her by the shoulders as fiercely as an eagle's talons. His gaze seemed to meet the middle of her head.

"Selune, give me back my powdered power!" he pleaded, tears forming in his bloodshot eyes. "The devils take the broken blood!" He shook her violently, jarring her against the marble floors. He was stronger than he looked. "The devils take the innocent! They eat his mother's heart!"

Tennora brought her knee up and forced him off her, to the side. His bony fingers clung to her, leaving bruises, but her kick pushed him away.

"No!" he wailed. "No! No! No!"

She pulled her dagger out and held it, ready to fight him off. Master Halnian surged to his feet, his eyes still mad, his

veins still protruding above his skin like strings pulling his overtaxed muscles into action. His hands moved swiftly and another spell started to build there—uneven and erratic.

"You are one of them!" he said. "You are one of them oneofthem oneofthem!" His voice dissolved into a murmur that became the verbal component of the spell. A column of light shot upward, piercing the tower floors and continuing into the sky.

"Oh Hells!" Cassian said. "Get out, get out!" He grabbed Shava by the hand and shoved Tennora ahead of him down the stairs.

"What's he doing?" Tennora shouted over the sudden roar of—

The first of the meteors struck when they reached the landing in front of the library. The tower jolted and threw Cassian and Shava to their knees. Tennora fell back against the wall and grabbed hold of the window ledge as a second shock rattled through the stones of the tower. The sound of Master Halnian's sobbing laughter echoed through the stairwell, and the plaster of the ceiling sifted down like heavy snow. They'd never make it down the spiralling stairs in time.

"Quickly!" Tennora shouted, pulling Shava and Cassian in turn to their feet. "Cass, get us out the window."

Cassian did as he was told, pulling a wand from his pocket. They climbed up beside him on the windowsill as a third and fourth shock hit the tower. "*Yuettfawellsevell*," he said, and all three leaped.

Tennora's heart caught in her throat as the wind whipped her hair free of its braid and the ground surged up

to meet them. Cassian reached out and grabbed her by the hand. She clung to him as if he could anchor her.

The spell that surrounded Cassian engulfed both Tennora and Shava and buoyed them just as they reached the ground. They landed as if they'd done no more than leaped off a step, but both women, never having experienced such a spell, landed on their knees.

"Hells and devils," Shava panted. "What's wrong with him?"

Tennora pulled herself to her feet. "He's been taking something. A smoke. I think it's some kind of—"

A piece of the granite casing, its polished pink and gray surface scorched and crumbling into gravel, slammed into the ground, peeling up the mat of grass. Smaller chunks followed, skidding along the garden's turf. Tennora risked a look up as she scrambled back out of their reach.

The meteors had stopped, but the tower was coming down. It leaned toward them at a precarious angle. The casing had been knocked out of true and, freed of its mortar, rained down on them. If Master Halnian had another fit, threw out another spell, the building wouldn't stand a chance.

"We have to get out of the way!" Shava cried.

"But Master Halnian—" Cassian said.

Tennora sprinted toward the gate. The guards were rushing in, trying—no doubt—to rescue Master Halnian. And best of luck to them—even if they could get inside the tower, even if Master Halnian was still alive, they still had to contend with Master Halnian himself.

"Outside his study," Shava said. "Quickly!"

"And carefully!" Tennora added over her shoulder. Whatever Master Halnian had been breathing, he wasn't entirely in his right mind. She dashed through the gates as a squadron of the Watch clattered in, bellowing for someone in charge.

Very good luck to you if you find him, Tennora thought, and she added a little prayer to Tymora and fallen Mystra that Master Halnian had not been killed by his own spell or by the drug that smoldered in his brazier.

Behind her, Cassian kept calling her name, but she didn't look back. She ran into the streets of the South Ward, holding the gorget of the Songdragon to her chest and trying not to grin. It was, as her aunt would have said, a most inappropriate time to be elated.

THIRTEEN

Nestrix's consciousness swam near and darted away several times before she could grasp hold of it and pull herself from sleep. She swayed as she sat up, and took in her surroundings. She had awakened in a cold, dank room. No—a cage, she amended. She was surrounded by iron bars, and beyond that slick walls of mold-covered brick illumined in the meager light of a few caged glowballs. Vague shapes of boxes or trunks or furniture huddled in the shadows. The sound of rushing water thrummed from every direction. Water dripped on her head from a ceiling she couldn't see. The stormcloak she'd purchased hung around her neck, soaked through and tatter-edged when she felt along it. Someone had pulled out all the pins.

Her head was pounding and her throat was parched. She opened her mouth and tilted her head back to catch the water, then nearly spit it out at the foul, metallic taste. She made herself swallow and take a few more drops. Her mouth and throat burned.

She remembered the lightning breath, the brief moment when she felt as powerful as a summer storm—just before her pathetic body failed her. She gently prodded the blisters at the comers of her mouth.

Then she remembered why she had breathed the lightning she knew she couldn't handle.

Tennora ... and the *taaldarax*.

Nestrix sprang to her feet, to the bars. She passed them one by one under her hands, searching for the door. It

rattled when she grabbed it, but for all her shaking, it wouldn't budge.

Her stupid, useless eyes couldn't pierce the darkness, but she couldn't smell Tennora anywhere. Just the buttery must of old wood, the sharpness of rust, and the sweet putrescence of stagnant water. No wizard-thieves. No *dokaal* with inky fingers.

She slid down to her knees, alone in the dark.

She was at the mercy of the green *taaldarax*. How her heart had stopped when she'd thrown open the door. She'd expected to find Tennora hurt and cornered. She'd expected to find another of his *lovacs* looming over her.

But the *taaldarax* himself, even in the skin of a young man, was unmistakable. She didn't doubt he'd felt the same explosion of recognition—underneath that acrid, swampy smell of his were still the cool, dusty notes of a male dragon. Whatever he had looked like to Tennora and the other *dokaal*, Nestrix only saw the proud, sharp features of a young green, all horn and fang.

And arrogance—a dangerous arrogance.

She swallowed, trying to wet her mouth, and found herself thinking of her grandsire, Chendarixanath, a hoary old *ulhar* with a horn that could gouge a hole in a ship as it sailed. He had been a player in the great game, had still been playing when the Spellplague rolled over Faerun. Nestrix did not know what had become of him.

For a decade she had learned the game from him, curious and hungry for power at first, then bored and disinterested in its intricacies, at which point he chased her from his caverns. If she closed her eyes, she could remember

watching Chendarixanath doling orders out to his *lovacs* and lecturing a younger, coltish version of her dragon self. She could remember the basic rules of the game, boomed out in guttural Draconic.

"First," he said, "you may not act against another player. *Xorvintaal* is about subtlety and patience. To cut another player out, you must trap them with their own movements."

The green and his *lovac* had spoken as if she were a player, fully knowing she had already broken the most cardinal of rules. It did not bode well for her, she thought. Either he no longer suspected her of playing, or he was not so fond of following rules himself.

"Your pieces are your greatest asset," Chendarixanath had said. "And your greatest obstacle; a weakness in them is a weakness in you. Cull those you cannot trust."

The man with the knives was clearly the *lovac*, the foremost of the green's pieces in Waterdeep. And yet it was the *taaldarax* who had attacked Tennora, when he should have ordered the *lovac* to put other pieces into play. Alert the Watch of a false crime. Imply the betrayal of some local criminals. Even hiring someone to hire an assassin would have been a reasonable, if artless, move.

But no. The green had disdained such thoughtful planning and chosen instead to make himself a piece in the game, making himself his greatest weakness. Her grandsire would have been disgusted.

"Half of the game is what you do," he had said, "but the true art is in the other half—what you force others to do by the moves you take. Between your actions, your opponents' reactions will determine your success."

Another voice, this one a human man with white hair on his chin instead of his head, imposed itself on her. "You'll get yourself into trouble if you jump into it like that." She'd asked what she should do. "Wait. Let them trip on themselves."

The memory of sitting by the hearth, listening to his stories, filled her thoughts. But where Nestrix would have sat, the image fluttered between two girls—one with golden hair, one with deepnight black. One who should be dead, and one who had never existed. But which was which? Lyra the thief and Nestrix the dragon, or Nestrix the thief and Lyra the bronze: they blurred and blended until she didn't know which to trust.

"Fine," she muttered. "You think you know better? Tell me what to do."

The fractured memories of Lyra the thief swarmed her thoughts. Nestrix let them, listening to the dead woman's thoughts for the first time in her life and gleaning a sort of wisdom from them.

Lyra's memories fluttered by, following their own unfathomable pattern. They showed Nestrix how to cheat at cards, how to ride a horse, how to flirt, how to bargain, how to pick a lock ...

Nestrix startled herself from the borrowed memories of long-fingered hands working the two tools in the workings of an elaborate lock.

From the other edge of the darkness, the glow of a lantern broke the gloom. Nestrix lay down again, as if asleep, but watched from beneath nearly closed lids as two men entered.

The first was a young man wearing a green velvet coat and walking with a cane. He was coughing and held a handkerchief to his mouth. The coughing grew worse, and he had to stop and lean against the second man for a moment.

"Tiamat m'henich" he swore in Draconic as the coughing subsided. The hairs on Nestrix's neck stood on end. That was the *taaldarax*.

"Master," the second man, the *lovac*, said, "sit down. Rest yourself."

"Away, Ferremo," the other man snapped. "I don't need a nursemaid." He limped away from the antiquary. The light moved with him and illumined a comfortable-looking chair among the dark hulks of a dozen chests. The man with the cane scowled at it, but sat anyway.

"How long will she be unconscious?" he asked.

"It is hard to say," Ferremo answered, and Nestrix realized they meant her. "It should only have been a few hours ... but we navigate uncharted waters here." He paused for the briefest moment. "If what you say is true, master."

The man in the chair grunted. "Have I ever been wrong before?"

"Of course not," Ferremo said. "Never in my time with you." He paused. "But the bounty hunter and his story are ... quite compelling."

A tense pause. "Whenever did you find the time to seek out a bounty hunter?"

"I—that is, Alina brought him to my attention. The likeness is—"

"The result of a decent artist and a foolish magistrate. Words on foolscap do not make a fact." He began coughing once more, and it was long moments before it subsided.

"The girl," Ferremo said, "her *lovac*, came to the shop. She offered a trade." "I don't want it," the man with the cane said.

"She offers a relic. Of the world before the Blue Fire. A collar meant to protect against the dragonward."

His master snorted. "I will not need it much longer."

"Master, as a precaution. You're suffering."

"I will endure," he said. "And what does she want in return? Her mistress?"

"Yes." Another pause. "Consider it, master. The creature is not worth your—" He broke off with a sudden gasp.

"You'll mind your tongue, Ferremo," the *taaldarax* said.

"Whoever she is to you and me—foe or friend or innocent—she is your better."

"And if she is not?" Ferremo asked, after a breath or two. "Master?"

A long silence hung in the air. "Do you think I cannot tell the difference?" the man with the cane said. "Do you think I'd mistake a human for one of the *ulhar*?"

"You ... you are ailing, master."

"May I never be so frail as to ..." He trailed off. "Awake, are we?"

Nestrix cursed silently, but she sat up once more with an easy grace. "You are frail enough to have missed *that*. I have been awake some time now, *taaldarax*." She glanced over at the antiquary turned *lovac*. "You wound me, *dokaal*. You'll live to regret it."

"Leave us," the assassin's master growled at him. Ferremo gave a quick bow, his eyes never leaving Nestrix. When the *lovac* had left, the dragon in the man's skin stood still and regarded Nestrix for a long while.

"You're a blue," the man said in Draconic. The sharp consonants rolled off his tongue as easily as an old tavern song, without the slightest of two-legged accents. Even Nestrix's tongue tripped on her first language now.

"Are you certain?" she said acidly.

He clucked his tongue. "I'm cleverer than most, *ulhar*. I know what you are, even if I've never met your kind before."

"And I've never met a green before," Nestrix said, "but your arrogance precedes you. Even if you hoard like one of the *aussir*."

"How droll." He stepped into the light. An overdramatic gesture, Nestrix thought, worthy of a young and self-absorbed dragon. "I wondered. You always hear the *ulhar* are too vain to notice much beyond the ends of their horns."

She smiled sweetly. "What am I doing in this cage?"

"Talking," the man said with a smile. "Preferably about how you've managed to evade the dragonward's effects."

Nestrix bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Why?" she said, her voice dripping honey. "Does the dragonward bother you?"

He stood at the bars of the cage, and she could see now that it did. He clutched the walking stick like an old man with a palsy, and he was breathing heavily. His skin was pale, and a fine bead of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"How did you do it?" he said calmly.

"I merely entered the city," she said.

"Now who's being arrogant?" He held up a hand and whispered words that Nestrix knew were a spell, even if she couldn't identify it.

A lance of icy air pierced her lungs, and she was suddenly so cold she couldn't draw breath. She twisted out of its path, but the frost lingered in her chest.

"*Henich*," she hissed. "Bastard! This is your plan? Cage me up and throw ice at me? What do I care? I have nothing left."

He paced along the edge of the cage. "I've asked around—as much as I can in the space of a night. None of the *taaldarax* I know recognize you. What are you doing in my territory?"

"They wouldn't know me," Nestrix said, standing. If he was going to torture her, he'd look her in the teeth as he did it. "As I don't play *xorvintaal*."

"Then who are you working for?"

Nestrix laughed. "Don't you listen? This has nothing to do with your little game. I have no interest in the machinations of mortals." She pulled herself to her feet. "And you *know* that. You can't kidnap or kill another player."

The man did not blink. "You'll find there are a lot of rules I know my way around. Tell me your name."

"Clytemorrenestrix. Of the Calim, last time any of your opponents heard of me."

He repeated the name under his breath, likely telling that *lovac* of his to ask around about her. There was nothing to find, she knew, save the possible opinion that she was just a mad human woman with a few lucky talents. She thought of Tennora and the leaflet she'd found.

"I am Andareunarthex," he said, but dissolved into another fit of coughing. He pressed the bloodstained handkerchief to his lips.

"Of Waterdeep?" Nestrix asked.

When the coughing faded, he fixed his dark emerald eyes on her again. "You are a mystery, Clytemorrenestrix. You're a blue—even if Ferremo tells me otherwise, even if your girl says the same, even if there's a hunter calling you to court for human laws' sake. You and I know what is what. You're no more human than I am." He settled back into his chair. "And you say you are no *taaldarax*, but you dance around my questions as if their answers matter a great deal to you and quote rules back at me like an old one."

Another spell burst from his wand, surrounding Nestrix in a blur of purple light that stung her skin like a swarm of wasps and made her bones feel as if they were melting. She tumbled to her knees.

Dareun leaned forward, looking down at her.

"But whatever you are," he said, "you cannot stop me from taking what I want."

"Why bother?" Nestrix panted. "The dragonward's doing a fine job bringing you down."

Dareun smiled. "For now. Ferremo!" he shouted over his shoulder. The assassin stepped forward and bowed.

"We will take the girl up on her offer," Dareun said. "Who knows—it could be exactly what I need."

Ferremo bowed again. "Shall I shackle this one?" he said.

"No," Dareun said, turning back to Nestrix with a smug look on his face. "We're having such a lovely conversation. She should stay."

Ferremo hesitated. "The girl's certain to make a fuss though." "Well then," Dareun said, and Nestrix felt her heart freeze even as he spoke. "Why don't you give her the business end of your knife for her troubles?"

FOURTEEN

Tennora waited beneath the street lamp at the street corner nearest the antiquary's shop, the sack with the gorget heavy as a millstone in her hand. *The key is the singer's collar.* Her plan would work. It had to.

Even if she wasn't certain the statue had meant the Songdragon's gorget. She thought of Aundra's naked frustration with the God Catcher's cryptic words. The statues' prophecies were not the neat explanations one found in chapbooks.

She watched the windows of the shop, waiting for the lights to turn on. Be calm, she thought. Be polite. He was going to try to hurt her—she didn't doubt that. But if he saw her as cool and well-mannered, he might not try as hard as if he thought she would fight.

Much like a nasty relation with a sharp tongue. Tennora wondered if her mother knew her advice could be applied to a situation as far from life among the nobility as the one that lay before her.

The lights in the shop came on. Tennora gripped the sack tighter until her hand tingled from the effort. Now or never, she thought.

The door was unlocked, and the room beyond nearly repaired from the earlier fight. Ferremo sat in an ornate, gilt wooden chair, ignoring her and examining a scuff on the heel of one boot. His lower lip was swollen and bruised.

"Well met," he said. "What have you brought me?"

Tennora didn't move. "Where's Nestrix?"

He jabbed a thumb toward the magically protected door. "Give me what I want, and I'll let you in."

"That hardly seems fair."

"You're not in a position to make the terms," he said. "I keep your mistress, and nothing changes much for me. I bring her out before I have what you're offering, and you have an ally—while I'm all on my own. Show me what it is."

Tennora hesitated for a moment, then withdrew the gorget from the bag.

Ferremo's eyes widened at the moonstone and the silvery metal that gleamed even in the faint light. He reached to take it, but Tennora pulled it away.

"So that's it?" he said. "That will block the dragonward's powers."

"It's charmed to counteract them," she said. "All he has to do is put it on. Now open the door and I'll hand it over."

"Certainly," he said with a coppery grin. "It's the least I can do."

He went to the door, sidestepping the pressure plate. A quick spell and an intricate wave of his left hand—and, Tennora suspected, the emerald ring on it—and the ward that had been protecting the door shivered and vanished. He opened the door and turned back to her with an elaborate bow.

"Here you are."

Tennora stayed where she was. "Where are your knives?"

"You think I'm going to cross you?"

Tennora shrugged and gave a coy smile. "You'll pardon the presumption, but it does seem likely."

He smiled back and pulled the knives from his belt, held them out, flipped them over into his grip, and lunged at her. Tennora leaped back out of his reach and swung the gorget in its bag up into his chin.

He grunted and fell back, clutching his doubly wounded jaw. A drop of blood bloomed between his fingers.

"Come with me and you won't get hurt."

"Oh, like Hells," Tennora snapped. She pulled a carvestar from her belt and spun it into his forearm. He cursed and pulled the carvestar free. His arm bleeding, he grabbed her by the wrist.

Tennora twisted under his arm and reached for her dagger, but he moved around her and out of the way, pinning her against him.

His arm locked around her throat, pressing into both sides. She struggled against him, jamming her elbow over and over into his gut, while her vision crumbled from the outside in. After a few seconds, everything went dark.

Tennora woke a moment later, bruised, dizzy, and lying on the floor on her stomach. Her feet were lashed together, and Ferremo was busy doing the same to her wrists behind her back.

"You are going to make me get your blood all over the floor," he said in a disgusted voice, "if you don't stop fighting back."

She spit on his boots.

He kicked her in the ribs, and a shock of pain exploded across her chest and drove the air from her lungs.

"Lie there and be quiet." He walked away, out of her line of sight.

Tennora wriggled her hands within the bonds. He'd tied them tightly, but the rope still had some give to it and each motion stretched the bonds. She could hear Ferremo's muffled voice as he paced in the distance.

She pulled her wrists up, so that they met the belt she wore. Pressing the rope into the cloth and lifting her torso off the floor, she twisted her belt so that the dagger that lay beneath her hip crept inch by inch toward the small of her back.

She nearly had it when Ferremo returned, still speaking to Dareun.

"Master, it's not that simple," he said, his voice tense and poorly covering an edge of anger. "If I kill her, I need to dispose of the body. This isn't a neighborhood where people won't notice. And if you need me—" A pause. "Pegno is dead. Alina is in the dungeons, and I wouldn't trust Arvinik with such a task." Another pause. "Master, it's more complicated than that. If you were to change, you could get rid of ... I beg your pardon, master. I didn't ..." A very long pause, and Tennora suspected Ferremo was getting an earful. "You need me there ... Yes. That is what's most important. Thank you, master. I will."

His boots tapped across the floor. He took her by the braid and lifted her head off the floor.

"Much as I hate the situation," Ferremo said, "we're pressed for time and have to go about it the old-fashioned way. You're going for a swim."

The hilt of his dagger clubbed her behind the ear, and Tennora's world went black.

The cobbles below drifted by like floes of ice on the harbor, Tennora thought. Were there floes on the harbor? No ... it was still summer, even if autumn was nipping at the days' ankles. She had only thought that because the harbor was nearby. She could hear the lap of waves against the piers and the sounds of the boats rocking into each other as she went down the street, hanging down and looking at the cobblestones.

Terror returned to her like a white-hot knife through her core, and she realized she was hanging over the saddle of a horse, her arms bound behind her back, her ankles tied together. The boot near her nose was ornately decorated with gold embroidery and patches of some sort of dyed hide.

Ferremo. And everything else came back in a rush.

She made herself stay slack—let him think she was unconscious a little longer while she figured out what to do.

He reined in the horse at the edge of a dock and climbed down, hefting her onto his shoulder. She stayed still, though her heart was pounding. If she struggled free, she had no chance to run and he might just kill her outright.

He heaved her off onto the boards, tugged the knots at her ankles and wrists to make certain they were tight. The rope pinched painfully against her skin, but Tennora didn't react any more than if he'd pulled a tangle of her hair loose. She let her head loll.

"You should be glad," Ferremo said. "At least you don't have to smell the sewers while you wait to die, like she does. And by the way"—he grabbed her chin and pulled her face toward him—"I know you're awake." He scooped her up and threw her over the side of the dock.

Icy water slammed into Tennora, solid as a wall, shocking her to her senses with a gasp. Blessed instinct made her hold that breath, and she sank, watching dumbly as the light from the street lamps wavered and shrank from her sight.

The cold pressed into her skin and jarred her from her trance. It was summer, but the water flowing down from the north had not lost its chill. She thrashed against the water and her restraints. She had to get to the surface. She needed air! Her weakened lungs started to spasm, remembering the agony of featherlung, wanting to prove they could still draw breath.

No, she thought, surprising herself with her own calmness. If she surfaced, Ferremo would kill her for certain. She needed to get farther away, to struggle out of her bonds.

She sank, deeper and deeper, until she felt her feet touch the bottom of the harbor. Her calm was no use against her screaming lungs. Half a breath escaped her and bubbled up to the surface. Wriggling against the ropes that bound

her wrists, she stretched them until she could drag one arm free.

The knot around her ankles was tighter, and her freezing fingers couldn't seem to pull the cords free. Her lungs shrieking with pain, she let out the rest of her breath as she dug her fingernails into the hemp. It wouldn't budge.

The edges of her vision crumbled. She took in a mouthful of brackish water and nearly panicked as it flowed over her tongue. She made herself swallow to keep it from her lungs. Forget the knots—she needed air.

Not straight up, she told herself, though it was torture not to make for the nearest surface. Ferremo waited there, she didn't doubt.

She pushed off the muddy floor of the harbor, swimming with her hands toward the dark shape of a boat's hull. The rope dragged behind her, slowing her down. She fought against it, against the icy water, with every last bit of her strength.

Just as she thought she would never escape the water, Tennora broke the surface and gulped air.

The night was clear, and Selune was full and shining on the waters. Tennora floated on her back for a moment, taking long, slow breaths. The boat she clung to, a skiff trimmed in fishing nets, was perhaps sixty feet from the dock. She pulled herself along its hull and peered around the stern at Ferremo Magli, sitting on the dock, cleaning his nails with the tip of a knife and waiting to see if Tennora's corpse stayed down.

She hauled herself into the boat in one quick motion and lay on its deck, flat on her back and shivering.

A quarter hour passed before she heard the hoofbeats of Ferremo's horse passing on into the busier parts of the docks and the city beyond. Her muscles by then felt all but numb from her soaked leathers. Her wrists and ankles were chafed. She had not gotten Nestrix back, and her options for following through on her plans were far more dangerous than she'd hoped to have to work with.

But you aren't dead, she reminded herself. And once again, despite the inopportunity of the moment, Tennora couldn't help grinning.

Tennora approached the God Catcher cautiously, watching for signs of either Dareun's minions. If the followers of the dragon were there, they had hidden themselves admirably.

After another moment of watching, Tennora squelched her way across the square and into the building, favoring her wounded side. The cantrip she'd used had dried her clothes admirably, but her hair was still wet, her braid hanging down her back in a bedraggled line. And her boots were still soggy with mud and water that the spell couldn't seem to drive out. She thought about stirring up a fire to dry them by, and maybe sitting for a while, warming her bones, maybe getting a little bit of sleep. ...

She shook her head. Nestrix was still in trouble, and where Tennora had to go, it wouldn't matter if her boots were soggy. She trudged up the stairs.

At least you don't have to smell the sewers while you wait to die.

Wouldn't the Marchenors' son be aghast to discover a green dragon lairing in the sewers he so proudly patrolled? The sewers of Waterdeep were complicated and twisting. Where a hundred years earlier they lay in neat, straight lines to the bay, a burgeoning population and increasing rains had required that the tunnels and pipes be widened. And when that had not proven enough, the cellarers and plumbers' guild had dug new lines, above and below the existing sewers in some places. The results ran more tangled than the streets of Waterdeep—if one couldn't hide in Waterdeep Above, then Waterdeep Below was the place to be. Even the guards who patrolled the sewers for dens and warrens couldn't cover every inch of ground.

Like in many old buildings, the God Catcher's cellar ran into the sewers below. Unlike in many old buildings, this was because the God Catcher's leg had punctured the old sewer line when the ground beneath it had turned to mud. The leg, as the rest of the statue, had been hollowed out, and a passage led down to where the tenants could dump their wash water and chamber pots. Hot in the winter, cool in the summer, smelling rancid and musty all the year long—the entry point to the God Catcher's leg was open. And unguarded.

On the last flight of stairs, Veron sat waiting for her with a sour glare.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. "And what are you wearing?"

"None of your business," she said, climbing up around him. "And you have eyes; figure it out."

Veron fell into step beside her. "I have been worried senseless. I sat in that tavern for three hours waiting for you.

Those heart-warders thought I was a madman. How did you get past me?"

"You're not as observant as you think you are." She was tired and cold, and his line of questioning set her teeth on edge.

"Where did you go?" he said.

"To save Nestrix." She unlocked the door and strode inside. She'd need the dagger, the carvestars—a nap, oh by the watching gods, she was tired. How did people do this night after night? She sat down for a moment at the table, trying to gather her thoughts.

Veron dropped into the seat opposite her. "I thought we went over this."

She rubbed her eyes. "Yes, well, things have changed. The man who took her is up to something. And now he has an artifact to help him along. So you'll have to find someone else, because I'm not helping."

The bounty hunter regarded her for a long moment. "You look exhausted."

"Worse," she said. "What's worse than exhausted?"

"Dead."

Tennora shook her head behind her hands. "No, I'm not that lucky."

"Here," Veron said. She uncovered her face and looked down at the small clay vial he was holding. "It's good for exhaustion."

"Right," she said. "I'll bet it will put me right to sleep like a good girl, so you can go off and slay the dragons." Veron scowled and put the vial back in his pocket.

"You are too clever," he said. "All right. I can't let you do this by yourself. Let me help."

Tennora laughed. "Unless you have such a potion—" Veron sighed and pulled a second vial, silver and stoppered with wax. Tennora gave him a pointed look. "Enough games."

Veron pulled out his knife and worked the cap off. He took a sip and held the remainder out to her. "No games. I'm with you if you think this fellow is more trouble. But you have to tell me everything you know. And once we've reached her and stopped him, I have no choice but to take her in."

"*Try* to take her in," Tennora said. "You can't ask me to help you."

"I can, but you won't," he said. "Will you at least stand aside? Give me a chance."

Tennora eyed the silver vial. "She says she had a reason. For killing the wizard."

"Of course she had a reason," he said. "There's always a reason. Let the court decide if it's a good one."

"You don't think it's a good one."

He hesitated, and in that brief moment Tennora saw that he wasn't sure. For as much as Veron Angalen insisted on the rightness of his task, he did not know what had happened on that night in Cormyr—or any other time he

suspected that Nestrix had a hand in someone's death—any more than Tennora did.

"The odds say no," he said, "she didn't have a good reason. When someone is tied to as many deaths as she is, even Tymora wouldn't take the bet that it's merely coincidence."

Tennora took the vial from him. "Perhaps you're watching the wrong pieces of her game," she said, and tipped the potion back. Within moments, the fatigue melted out of her muscles and the ache out of her bones. The bruise on the side of her face faded. She stretched her neck.

"Better?" Veron asked.

"Yes," Tennora said, standing. She went to the shelf beside her bed—the only one that hadn't been damaged—and took down her spellbook. "Give me an hour."

"And then what?"

"And then," she said, "we're going into the sewers."

FIFTEEN

Dareun was beginning to question his judgment—a feeling he despised acutely. But the creature who called herself Clytemorrenestrix of the Calim wasn't giving anything up. No amount of threats, of cajoling, of searing pain seemed to break through her insistence that she could not tell him how to avoid the dragonward as she clearly could. She lay now, breathing heavily on the bottom of the cage, bruised and bloodied.

And grinning at him. He sneered back. The bitch was mocking him, and it made him want to unleash everything he had left, freeze her to the core with the horror of the void and let her beg for the Dragon Queen's cruel embrace.

The rules of *xorvintaal* required him to give up what magic he came by naturally—a sacrifice Dareun was not fond of. Wizards made obvious *lovacs* to combat the deficiency, but Dareun found them untrustworthy creatures, too keen to try and outsmart him and gain more than their fair share.

He still used them of course, in areas where he had a toehold but no hope of advancing—lands where his plans all seemed to come to ruin at the worst possible moment. All the older, better-equipped players made certain of that.

The dark voice whispering at the back of his thoughts made spells inch to the tips of his fingers. Patience, he reminded himself. It did him no good at all to kill her.

Unless, of course, he was wrong about all of it.

"What brought you to Waterdeep?"

She laughed, spitting blood as she did. "My feet."

"How droll," he said. "It helps neither of us, this disobedience."

"Disobedience." She chuckled again. "Funny, wyrmling. You are no master of mine. I have told you already—I have nothing you want. You are wasting your time."

Dareun wasn't ready to accept that she might be telling the truth. He cast again, filling her thoughts with the cold darkness of the void that lay between him and the mad being of the star. Her screams seemed to please it—though its pleasure or displeasure was never an easy thing to gauge.

No matter; it pleased *him* to hear her scream.

"Why did you come to Waterdeep?" he asked again. She reached up and grabbed hold of a bar, panting and unable to speak. "Why have you—"

He had gotten too close. She struck through the bars, one hand clenching shut on his windpipe. Dareun gagged and tried to pull away as her nails dug into either side of the prominence of his throat. Those blue eyes burned with disgust.

Not to be outdone, he returned the glare and took hold of her wrist. He squeezed the bones together, grinding one against the other as he twisted. The joint popped. Finally, with a small cry, she released him and pulled her arm back. He let go of her as well and rubbed his neck as she rubbed her wrist. He eyed her warily.

Footsteps behind him caught his attention, and he turned as Ferremo entered the chamber, carrying a sack in one hand.

"Back already?"

Ferremo's expression tightened. "It's done." He opened the sack, took out a silvery collar set with a lavender stone, and bowed his head. Dareun had never seen the stone's equal; even in the gloom of the sewer, it caught every scrap of light and sent it shimmering back out. A worthy addition.

"She's dead?" Dareun asked.

"Of course," Ferremo said. "Master."

"No!" Nestrix cried. He looked back over his shoulder, his opinion wavering again. What dragon cried over a *lovac* so useless as one who got caught? He narrowed his eyes at Ferremo.

"You'll avoid that tone with me. You're certain she's dead?"

"Certain as I can be. She's at the bottom of the river."

"No bloody cloth? No heart on a platter?"

Ferremo gritted his teeth. "You said to be quick, master. Flair like that takes time. And clothes I don't mind ruining."

"Then how do I know you took care of things?"

"Have I failed you before?" Ferremo asked.

"Recent events have been less than to my liking. How do you know she's dead?"

"I stood by the water and watched until her breath broke the surface. Then I waited another few songs—she didn't come up."

"Did you see the body?"

"She's at the bottom of the harbor, master, and it's cold water. We won't see a body for another few days."

Dareun glared at his *lovac*. The slow growth of his insolence had reached an intolerable point. Ferremo hadn't agreed with the decision to infiltrate Waterdeep. Dareun didn't care—it was not a *lovacs* place to agree or disagree, only to act. Ferremo had not failed him, not yet, but it was inevitable.

He would deal with the human once his plans were complete.

He held out a hand. "Give me the collar."

Nestrix watched, horrified, as Dareun donned the gorget. There was no light or shimmer or sound as it closed around Dareun's neck, but Nestrix could see the change in him as its affects took hold. His spine lengthened, straightening his body. The breath he drew was smooth and deep and without the rattle that had plagued him. His face smoothed, his eyes widened, and Andareunarthex began to laugh.

"By all the gods!" he crowed. He flexed his hands and they moved easily. "I could unmask a hundred lords tonight! There is no power on Toril that could bring me low!"

The anger coiling in Nestrix's heart came together with a purpose. She would be that power; she would bring him low

or die trying. She thought of Tennora, poor Tennora, dead by that bastard *Iovac's* hand, and the rage rose to fill her, ready for the first chance she had.

He turned to face her, eyes glowing, teeth sharp and white. "You're going to get some company. I hear you miss your offspring."

Nestrix stiffened. "Watch your tongue."

"Nothing of the sort," he said. "How would you like someone else's offspring to watch after?"

The leg of the God Catcher had been fitted with stairs, winding around its thigh for a few score feet before ending at a walled landing still a hundred feet above the Waterdhavian sewers.

The air thickened as Tennora and Veron descended, filling their mouths with a sour, fetid taste. The stairs grew slick with a thin layer of mold, and below the sound of water gurgled past.

At the landing, Veron leaned over to gauge the distance.

"We'll have to lower ourselves down one at a time," he said. "Though it might land us in the water."

"Try not to," Tennora said. The sewers of Waterdeep were not known for their purity.

Veron withdrew a coil of thin, sturdy rope from his haversack and secured it with pitons and a complicated knot to the wall. He looped the other end into a sort of noose, though when he tugged on it, it didn't tighten. He slipped it

around Tennora so that the loop made a sort of seat, then tied a second loop at about chest height. She threaded her hand through it and held tight to the rope.

"I'll lower you down first," he said. "So you can carry the torch and have a look around. Let me know when you reach the bottom."

Tennora nodded, afraid to give voice to the nerves that were threatening to make her run back up the stairs, back to her cozy apartment and her books. Back—somehow—to her life as it was before carvestars and lockpicks and dragons. She took a deep breath to clear those thoughts from her mind, but they only scattered to a safe distance, like crows shooed from a garden.

She climbed over the wall and secured the rope around her seat. Veron handed her a torch to carry in her other hand, and he began to lower her down.

She would have liked to drop the torch and hold on with both hands. As soon as she started to descend, the rope began twisting so that she spun like a maple seed, the torch trailing a slow spiral of fire. Moreover, if the air above her had been thick, this was like trying to breathe through a wet rag. The close moistness carried scents so vile, Tennora's imagination ran wild with the possible sources. She gagged until she stopped trying to endure the fetid air and just held her breath. Her weak lungs protested, but it was better than the taste of the air.

As she neared the bottom, the torchlight caught the slow-moving water of the sewer channels, brown and thick. Tennora gagged again and was forced to take a deep breath of the noxious air.

"Stop!" she called, her voice echoing up the leg of the God Catcher. She had reached the spot where the statue had broken through the ancient sewers. The brick for twenty yards across was half a shade cleaner—though that wasn't saying much. Ahead of her, a narrow pathway ran along the wall, a hand span above the water, the access for the repair workers. She tossed the torch over onto the relatively dry pathway. It sputtered for a moment, but stayed lit.

She kicked her legs, like a child on a swing, gathering enough momentum to catch the lip of the ledge with her toes. She twisted and turned, straining to shift her weight over onto the ledge. If she could just turn over, she might be able to—

She managed to twist right out of her rope harness.

She yelped and landed in the water with a splash. It was shallow, but as foul as it had looked. Tennora quickly scrambled onto the safer pathway, where she vomited in earnest.

"All right?" Veron's voice echoed down from the ledge.

Tennora threw up a little more and spit, trying to clean her mouth. "More or less," she called back. "But you're pretty much certain to hit the water." She shook the filth from her hands.

The rope harness vanished up into the darkness, followed a few minutes later by Veron, lowering himself hand over hand. He came to a stop just inches above the water. He looked at the water as the rope slowly spun.

"I don't suppose there's some way you could ..." He trailed off, as Tennora raised an eyebrow. He sighed, leaned back, and slid out of the harness.

Veron came up coughing and gagging, and Tennora felt a small, shallow comfort at seeing him vomit at least as much as she had.

"Oh gods," he gasped.

"These sewers flow out of the Field Ward," Tennora said. "It's pretty crowded. And it's been raining lately."

"Can't you?" He waved his hands in a vague way. "Clean us up?"

Tennora smiled. "We're just going to get dirtier."

They walked until the pathway narrowed into nothing but a half width of brick protruding from the walls, and edged along it on their heels until it too diminished into nothing much.

Tennora gave in and stepped into the flow, torch high and eyes sharp for shapes in the water. Stories of what lived in the sewer plagued the nightmares of Waterdeep's impressionable children—the blindfin, garbage-hungry otyughs, sentient slime. The dumped bodies of victims who returned from the grave, seeking vengeance on their killers. She had squealed to hear tales of basilisks that had grown gills and a construct made entirely of chamber pot refuse. She had promised to take her baths to stave off a visit from the giant crocodile who took dirty babes back down to the sewer where they belonged. They were nursery stories, embellished to keep her squealing or behaving. But such stories had a kernel of truth nestled at their core.

There wasn't a doubt in her mind they would find what did live in the Waterdhavian sewers sooner or later—but she didn't want it to find her first.

"How did you come to be a bounty hunter?" she said to stave off her nerves.

Veron shrugged. "I wanted to see the world. I ..." He trailed off. "I wanted to go somewhere where no one knew me."

She glanced back at him. "That's a strange answer. What were you running from?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Nothing like *that*. I ... I came of age in Silverymoon. I'm certainly not the only half-orc there, but ..." He sighed. "Look, it's complicated."

"They want you to be something you aren't?" Tennora said.

He stopped, the effluvia swirling around his calves. "Why would you say that?" he asked, and Tennora knew she was right.

"Let's say I'm familiar with the symptoms."

They walked on a little farther before Veron spoke. "Some people think my family is some sort of grand experiment, doomed to fail," he said. "It's bad enough everyone who doesn't know my past sees something monstrous—but at home, I have to stand for every Many-Arrows marriage. If I'm no good, well, the whole kingdom's no good. The very idea of orcs and humans *marrying* is no good." They both stopped. Veron rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead. "I don't know why I'm telling you any of this."

Tennora shrugged. "Because I'm listening? You've definitely got me beat. I'm just supposed to be a proper lady, while everyone's waiting for me to be a thief."

"I thought you were a wizard."

"Apparently not."

The stream they slogged along opened into a large room. Five pipes, wide enough that either of them could stand upright and walk through them, branched off. Veron looked around at them.

"Which way?" Veron said.

"He'll have to be close to his other lair. The antiquary's shop on Jembril Street. That's ... south and a little east of the God Catcher." She turned, aligning herself with the streets so many feet above. "That one," she said, pointing to a pipe.

"Are you sure?" Veron asked.

Tennora gave him a puzzled look. "Do you have a better idea?"

Veron looked a little flustered and shrugged. "We should be sure. We should know where we're going."

"Well, we don't," Tennora said, pulling herself up into the pipe she'd indicated. "So you can come along or give up. We know he's probably in this direction, and he's probably in an isolated area."

Veron climbed up beside her. "Why would you assume that?"

"The guard patrols the sewers, but they certainly don't bother with all parts of it. Places where there's no room to walk, places that flood regularly, and places that are hard to get to only get a pass occasionally."

Veron looked impressed. Tennora smiled. If she survived this, she'd have to thank the Marchenors's son.

The next chamber flickered with a strange, cool light—not bright enough to illumine the space or reveal the source, but bright enough to be certain it wasn't a trick of their eyes. Tennora climbed carefully into the room. There was a lip only a foot wide at the mouth of the tunnel. The rest of the room was tiered, ever so slightly, with four rows of rectangular pools, each set a hand span above the next.

"Settling pools," she said. "Something must have gotten into them." Veron raised his torch. The light glinted off the stonework walls separating a dozen pools of sewage, and—

Tennora clapped a hand over her mouth, willing herself not to vomit again.

The pools seethed with sleek, slimy bodies writhing over each other. One leaped over its brothers and sisters to hang on the edge of the pool near Tennora—sensing food or blood or the gods knew what else—its sucker mouth and tiny ring of teeth working feverishly at the air. Overhead, the domed ceiling danced with the luminescence of the fish.

Veron stepped back, nearly falling into the tunnel. "What are they?"

"Blindfin," Tennora said, and took a slow, deep breath. "Silverfin once, but they were changed by the Spellplague. They're scavengers. They keep the waterways clean."

Veron made a face. "Nasty-looking things. Although they sound useful."

"You'll rethink their use if you fall in. They prefer dead things, but they're not smart enough or picky enough to tell

the difference right away." She shuddered. Like most children in Waterdeep, she'd feared the blindfin coming up out of the fountains and taps.

Veron swung the torch around, illuminating different parts of the chamber in turn. It was as large as the square of the God Catcher. The edges of the pools formed a path across the water, but otherwise there seemed no way out but the pipes and tunnels that flowed down from the surface.

"There," Veron said, pointing to the other side of the chamber. The tunnel there was a dark smear, but unlike with the others, Tennora couldn't discern brickwork that might indicate a rise. She glanced down at the pool walls.

Even in the meager light of the torch and the blindfin, the edge glistened with a heavy growth of algae as slimy as the blindfin themselves.

"Give me your hand," Tennora said. Taking it, she stepped carefully onto the wall.

The slime beneath her foot squelched. Her foot held, but when she lifted the other to step onto the wall fully, the shift of her weight made her slide. Veron gripped her hand hard and pulled her back, away from the seething blindfin, as she fell.

"Hells," Tennora said, coming to her feet and rubbing her backside. "We'll never make it across without help."

"We don't have much of a choice," Veron said. "Unless you want to go back and try a different pipe."

Tennora studied the rest of the room. There were four pipes like the one they had come through, sloping down

toward the settling pools and the blindfin. On the far wall, the pipes weren't even passable—blocked by some sort of valve. The pipe at the opposite side of the pools was the only way deeper into the sewers.

"We'll never be able to balance on this," she said. She scraped the slime with the side of her boot. It was at least as thick as her little finger. "We need something to hold on to."

"I have a little rope left."

"You'll never be able to tie it off."

"Watch."

Veron studied the shadows and whipped his crossbow over his shoulder. He pulled a length of rope from his pack and tied it to the bolt. Taking careful aim, he fired the quarrel into the far wall. It sank into the ancient mortar and lodged, the rope whipping out behind it. Veron knotted the other end and hooked it between two cracked bricks.

Tennora grasped the rope, and it held tight. "Very nice."

"Go slow," Veron said.

Together they inched their way along the slick edge of the pool, clinging to the rope. The blindfin slid past their feet, dropping from one pool to the next and leaving a trail of slime behind as they went. Tennora didn't dare look down at them.

Which was how she managed to plant her foot squarely on one's back. Her foot shot out from beneath her, and though she tried to keep hold of the rope, her fall pulled her hand loose. She tumbled over the edge into the water.

Her feet hit the bottom. The blindfin squirmed all around her, their tiny teeth seizing the leather, as she broke the surface. She scrambled for her dagger.

"Tennora!" Veron shouted. He reached for her, but tumbled in too, letting the torch fall.

It hissed as it hit the water and went out.

Tennora slashed at the roiling waters. If she could figure out how to kill them all, she would. She heard Veron reemerge beside her. By the way he cried out, the blindfin were just as interested in him, and the water was blooming with a mixture of blood. Tennora reached back and grabbed hold of her staff, starting to cast a spell of electricity; it would hurt, but it would kill the damned blindfin—

Metal screeched against metal, echoing through the chamber, as piercing as an animal in pain. The valves were opening.

"The edge!" she shouted. "Swim to the edge!" But where the Hells was it?

Stormwater rushed out into the settling pools. The first wave swelled over Tennora's head, pushing her back down among the blindfin. As the valves creaked farther open, the waves became violent. Tennora swam toward the surface again, toward where she'd heard Veron last.

But suddenly the water had a current, a current that was dragging her toward the pipe that led down into the sewers.

Her lungs were screaming. She swam hard for the surface, but the current was stronger, and she was sucked away into the bowels of Waterdeep.

Tennora slammed into a rusting metal grate. The plunge of water hammered on her back as she lay there, stunned and aching. She gulped air as if she had never tasted anything so fine.

She hauled herself out of the waterfall and felt along the grating for a wall to lean on. Her staff was still strapped tightly to her back, and she worked it free of the harness.

A quick spell, and a globe of light appeared in the space before her. A tunnel—part of the original sewers by the look of the bricks—stretched off into the darkness ahead. Within the grate, a trapdoor led to a ladder that followed the fall of water down into the newer, deeper sewers transecting it.

She beckoned the light down and examined her legs and arms. In at least a dozen places, the blindfin had bitten through the leather and into her skin—a few score more had managed to gouge new patterns into the tooled leather. Behind her knee there was a rather deep bite. She touched her cheek and found a series of bites there too.

All in all, much worse than she'd have liked, much better than her childhood nightmares had suggested.

But now she was alone.

"Veron!" she shouted. "Veron!"

Nothing.

She waited to see if Veron would come down the same pipe, until the light went out and there was nothing but the rush of water and the occasional slap of a blindfin hitting the grating before sliding through it.

Tennora conjured another globe of light, though this one flickered and seemed ready to go out. She came to her feet, unsteady as her light, and looked around. The trapdoor had a lock on it with a rusty keyhole. If Dareun was coming and going from the sewers, he wasn't going that way. She looked over her shoulder.

The tunnel waited like a hungry maw.

Tennora took her staff out and stepped into the water. She kept her right hand on the mold-slick wall to keep her oriented and leaned on the staff to spare her bitten leg until it stopped stinging. The light followed, bobbing alongside her and illuminating the crumbling brickwork.

Here and there, Tennora noticed scrapes in the layer of slime that covered everything—just the right height to be made by a person with a scabbard passing too close. The guard? Or one of Dareun's minions?

She walked a little more slowly, listening for sounds of someone up ahead. She had to be close, if not to Dareun's lair, then at least to an exit where she could get her bearings.

The globe went out with a soft pop just as she got far enough from the waterfall to stop hearing it, and Tennora was very glad she had a hand on the wall. She muttered the words to conjure more light, but the spell slipped away. Trying not to think about what might be swimming around her ankles, Tennora continued down the tunnel until the wall ended. Another passage continued to the right. With a sweep of her staff, she found the other edges of a leftward turn. She stood, listening to the sound of dripping and her breath.

Then, far down the left-hand passage, voices.

"Eyes sharp, Arvinik!" a man's voice said. "Take your leave."

Tennora pressed herself up against the wall as the flicker of lanterns came down another corridor.

"Any trouble with this one?" the first man said.

"Not as yet," a second man said. "But the master's said to keep a close eye. Trouble, she is."

"The two of you quiet down," a third voice called back. "You'll stir up Master Clamps."

Tennora frowned. Master Clamps?

"You shut yourself!" the second man, Arvinik, shouted back. "You're loud enough to wake a whole nest of crockers."

Tennora slipped back around the corner as the two relieved guards made their way farther down the corridor. Dareun's lair, and Nestrix was—no doubt—the one they'd been warned to watch closely. With only two guards, she might actually stand a chance, presuming of course she—

The water beside her erupted as something long and heavy launched itself from beneath the surface. Too shocked to cry out, Tennora twisted, throwing her staff between her and the threat. The creature caught the staff in its jaws and bit down, twisting the weapon from her grip and knocking her onto her backside.

She conjured another globe of light—this one flared into being with urgency, illuminating a crocodile more than three times as long as she was tall, biting down on her staff with jaws big enough to snap her in half. It turned its head to one

side to drop the staff, displaying one yellow, blind eye toward the light.

Before she could react, it lunged at her. The jaws snapped shut on her knee. Though the stiff leather kept the teeth from slicing through her, the bite crushed against her bone.

Then it rolled.

Tennora yelped as her leg pulled hard against its socket, but threw her body into the spin. The beast's motion yanked her through the fetid water, swirling her around and dizzying her. She reached out to slow herself, not thinking, and caught hold of her staff instead.

She stabbed the end of it toward the beast and felt it plunge in. The crocodile released her knee with a hissing snarl. The staff had sunk into its blind eye. Tennora crept slowly to her feet.

"Well met, Master Clamps," she panted.

When it lunged at her again, she was quick enough to stab the staff right down its throat. The crocodile hissed again and shook its head, trying to break the staff from her grip. Tennora edged closer, forcing the staff deeper. The crocodile slithered backward down the corridor.

"All right," Tennora said, pulling her staff out. "Back to your nest, beastie."

Master Clamps had other plans.

The crocodile leaped forward, jaws wide. Tennora darted to one side and dived onto its scaly back. The beast thrashed, but she clung tight, wrapping her arm around its

snout. It started to roll again, and before it pulled her under, she drew her dagger.

She raked the blade over the soft throat, again and again, until Master Clamps stopped spinning and thick blood streamed from its throat.

Panting and dizzy, Tennora wriggled out from beneath the corpse. Her leg screamed with pain when she put her weight on it, but she'd manage. She looked down at the monstrous crocodile she'd killed all on her own then back up at the dark corridor.

If only Dareun would fall as easily.

SIXTEEN

The home of Nazra Mrays glittered with hundreds of magical lights, buoyed by the laughter of several score pleasantly drunk guests. Plucking a glass of wine from the tray of a passing servant, Nazra started another turn around the party, loving the sounds of her painted silk skirts whisking against the floor, the clink of glasses, the calls of her friends and admirers. Nazra wrapped herself in their delight—she did love fests so.

Meridian Cloudcroft, a clever old elf who knew half her secrets but none of the good ones, held his glass up in a mock toast. "Good evening, my dear. A terrific success."

She held her glass up in turn. "Many thanks, old friend. I do try."

"And where's little Antoum?"

"In bed," she said with a chuckle. "He may be *my* son, but he's only got eight years under his belt, and that is not enough to weather one of my parties."

Which wasn't to say he hadn't begged to be allowed to watch and visit with those friends of hers he knew and liked, Cloudcroft among them. She had compromised—he could have a piece of anise cake and a little watered wine, and he could watch the guests arrive in their finery. Antoum hadn't been happy about that, but it was the best he was going to get.

"Pity," Cloudcroft said. "Have a new illusion to show him." He twisted the rim of the pin he wore, and a small blue

dragon seemed to fly out of it and circle the perimeter, roaring. Nazra laughed.

"Ah! You'll have to come by another time. He'd adore it."

"Have you noticed we're missing Master Sandhor?"

She leaned in close. "Indeed. I wonder if he's slighting me or just distracted by something more ... political?" She winked.

Cloudcroft laughed. He and Nazra had been friends since she was much younger and much glimmer, and he dark-haired and broad-shouldered. They'd shared more than one bed in those days. He knew many things about Nazra that no one else did, and believed a few more, such as Nazra being one of the Masked Lords and that he might be Antoum's father—though for that to be so, Nazra would have had to endure a great many more months of pregnancy than normal.

She let him have his jokes and played along.

"If he comes late, do let me know," she said with a smile. "I'd like to take some of the wind from that old cog's sails."

"As long as I can watch," Cloudcroft said.

Nazra passed back into the crowd, greeting her guests and praising their attire. But in her mind she was upstairs, watching her son sleep peacefully. There were those in Waterdeep—many of them in her home that night—who thought Nazra Mrays was a paltry excuse for a mother and thanked the gods that she had coin enough to give over the care of her son to hired help. Nazra smiled and laughed, and knew better—Antoum was her pride and joy. Let them

overlook him as some spoiled, motherless child; he and Nazra knew better.

"Good evening," a voice said near her ear, "and well met."

Nazra turned and found herself looking into the dark green eyes of a man who—while good-looking—was too young for her. She stepped back, appraising his well-cut—and thoroughly outdated—green velvet jerkin and breeches. He wore a matching half cloak and a silly-looking collar with a great gaudy moonstone on it. Amusing, to say the least.

"Well met indeed," she said. "Though I don't recall meeting you before. I'm Nazra. And you are?"

"A meager star orbiting your brightness," he said with a certain earnestness that indicated he was *much* too young for Nazra. Nazra raised her eyebrows. At least he had the decency to blush.

"I must beg your forgiveness," the young man said. "I don't often do this, and I find I'm getting ahead of myself."

Nazra smiled and fluttered her lashes in the way young men who read too many chapbooks found charming. "You're doing just fine, dear boy."

"I'm very glad to hear it," he said. "Could we walk in the garden? I should like the privacy."

A bold one, Nazra thought. Ah well, if he got *too* bold, it would just give her a good reason to make him the end of a good joke later, refreshing everyone's spirits. She took his proffered arm.

The night was cool, the first edge of autumn taking hold after a long hot summer. The sky was clear, and Selune had the grace to shift away toward the horizon, giving the stars room to shine. Climbing vinestar blossoms scented the garden, and a marble fountain bubbled near the back wall.

"A lovely garden," he said, "though not half so lovely as its mistress."

"Did Cloudcroft send you to tease me?" Nazra said slyly. "A handsome young man, squiring me around a moonlit garden, mysterious as a chapbook hero. You'd better be careful. An old lady like me could have a fit of shock with this kind of treatment."

"Would you like to hear a joke?" he asked shyly. "I've heard you're fond of them. First the ... Wait, how does it go? First I say ..."

"You trip on your own tongue," she said with a laugh. "It's much easier if you don't try so hard."

"I suppose you know better. Here, give me another chance." He stopped at the fountain and slid around to face her. "First, I say to you: I've taken your son."

Nazra rolled her eyes. That wasn't remotely funny. Then she saw the young man wasn't laughing, and her heart stopped. "What do you mean?" she said.

"I've taken him. You see, I want something you have, and it's terribly important you know I'm serious. Now, you say—"

Nazra started to scream for her bodyguards, only to find the man's gloved hand stifling her mouth. She stomped on his instep, but his foot suddenly wasn't there. He seized her, pinning her arms to her sides, and pulled her too close to

struggle free—as skinny as he'd looked, he was as strong as an ogre.

"Now, don't do anything that might make me angry," he whispered in her ear. "You do this wrong, and I might just kill little Antoum anyway. For now he's quite safe somewhere you'll never find him, and he'll stay that way until one of two things happens.

"I want the staff."

Nazra tried to shake her head, but the young man held her fast. "I know. You've been told to say you don't have it. It's in the Blackstaffs care. But I know for a fact that staff is nowhere near Blackstaff Tower. You have it, and you know where you keep it. Bring me the dragonstaff of Ahghairon, and Antoum comes home in one piece.

"But if I hear so much as a sword rattling in its scabbard, your boy dies. Understand? You don't tell your guards. You don't tell the lords. You don't tell the Watch."

Down to her bones, Nazra shook with fear, with rage, with uncertainty. Antoum—her poor little boy—Antoum who was too young, too *perfect* to die. Not like this. If the man let her go, she could race to the staffs hiding place, have it in his hands before he could harm Antoum. Her little boy.

But the dragonstaff was no trifle or trophy. She held it for the safety of Waterdeep, and she had a duty to make certain it was secure. It wasn't hers to give.

The shadows near the arched portico that led to the garden grew deep and spread as a large body passed the entrance. Jorik. The half-orc bodyguard glanced up into the garden, idly—and with every ounce of will in her, Nazra begged him to notice her in the shadows.

He did. "Who's there?" he shouted, stepping into the gardens. He drew the short sword he always carried. "Show yourself."

"I'll give you three days," the man said, unperturbed by the threat, "to think it over. If there are guards here when I come back, your boy's corpse will be floating in the bay."

Jorik spotted them and sprinted toward Nazra, leaping over the low bushes. The young man let go of her, shoving her to the ground where she landed on her back. He tore off one glove, revealing a brace of rings. He grabbed a fat gold one and twisted it.

And abruptly vanished.

Jorik skidded into the space the kidnapper had occupied, sword up and ready. Panting and puzzled, he lowered his sword.

"What happened? Are you all right, Lady Mrays?" he asked.

"No, Jorik," she said, letting him help her to her feet. "We've got trouble. Come." She walked quickly through the house, wishing she could tear off the heavy skirts. Another two bodyguards—how could they have missed someone stealing her boy?—stood by the stairs, and she grabbed them by the arms.

"Give me your sword," she snapped at one. Blade ready, guards close, she threw open the door of the nursery.

The governess slumped in her chair, her pale throat cut and gore all down her dress. Her son's guards had fallen where they stood on either side of the door, their entrails

spread across the floor and their blood seeping into the carpet. The window was open to the night.

Antoum's bed was empty.

Nazra rushed to it anyway, as if by throwing aside the blankets and the pillows she would find him, curled up tight like a frightened rabbit. The sheets were still warm where he'd lain. She pressed her hands to it, willing the nightmare to end.

On the wall just above Antoum's pillow, a spot of blood bright as her lip stain crept down the wall.

She raised a trembling hand to it, touched the sticky fluid. Terror overwhelmed her. Her breath came too fast. Her heart beat like a caged dove. Gods, oh gods. They'd hurt him. They would kill him.

She had to do something!

Nazra swallowed all those emotions, so that her voice was cold and calm when she spoke to the chief of her guards. "I'm going to my study. Jorik, send two men to guard the doors and tell Cloudcroft and Agnea to keep the guests happy in my absence—tell them I've had too much to drink for an old woman—but ease them out. I want it quiet in an hour. The rest of the men, go get them searching. Quietly. Look for clues around the grounds." She took in the bodies of the governess and the two guards. "Have Agnea find their next of kin and get the priests in here to clean up."

"Yes, saer," Jorik said, and sheathed his sword.

She picked up her skirts and hurried down the hall to her study, the young man's dark green eyes and sharp nose keen in her memory. Three days, and in those three days,

she needed to learn as much as possible, as quietly as possible.

He'd had a faint accent—something guttural she couldn't place. He was a wizard of some sort—

No. Not a wizard. Not necessarily. He'd done his magic with an enchanted ring. Rich and clever—and not, himself, Waterdhavian.

He might be clever, but she was cleverer.

Let's find out who you're working for, she thought.

She pulled the cloth off her mirror and activated the spell that opened a connection to a mirror in the palace of the Open Lord Dagult Neverember. Her reflection wavered and was replaced by an elderly halfling polishing a silver tray and grumbling to himself.

"Well met, Madrak," Nazra said. The halfling startled. Seeing Nazra in the mirror, he sketched an elaborate bow.

"Goodwoman Mrays," he said, "to what do we—"

"I need to speak with Lord Neverember. Now."

"I'm afraid the Open Lord is ... indisposed."

"I don't care about his disposition," Nazra said sharply. "Find him. Bring him here. If he says he won't come, remind him he owes me a favor for certain services rendered."

"Very good, saer," the halfling said with another bow. He tucked the platter under his arm and walked out of Nazra's sight.

She pulled open the drawer of her writing desk and took out a stylus and a bit of foolscap. She wrote a list of all the attributes of the young man she could remember: his eyes, his hair, his height, the details of the strange collar he wore, the number of rings, and so on. She wrote until her mind felt as if it had been wrung dry. Then she turned it over and started on the details of Antoum's room: the window, the wounds, the blood on the wall—

Her hand started to shake.

The face of a man, his features stern and proud, his hair wild and tawny as the mane of a lion, appeared in the frame of the mirror. He snorted. "Nazra. This better be important. I was ... enjoying someone's company."

"My son has been taken," Nazra said to Dagult Neverember, the Open Lord of Waterdeep. "There *is* nothing more important."

That visibly startled Dagult. He had a son too, Nazra knew, and she recognized too well the emotions that shifted over his normally closed features in quick succession. *There but for the blessings of Tymora would I be.* He recovered quickly.

"Who have you angered now, Nazra?" he said. "Whose temper have you roused with that sharp tongue?"

"No one to be trifled with," she said. "This is neither a matter of politics nor politeness. I need your help and I need your silence. He wants the dragonstaff."

"The dragonstaff?" Dagult said. "The dragonstaff?" He shook his head. "That won't do at all. We can't possibly—"

"He has Antoum!" Nazra cried. "I have but three days to find him out and track him down. If I can't ... if I don't give him the dragonstaff, he'll kill my son."

"Out of the question," Dagult said. "It's not yours to give." He leaned in closer to the mirror, as if it would obscure what he whispered next. "You took an oath, Nazra, an oath you cannot break."

"And I'm not asking you to give him the dragonstaff." Not yet, she added to herself, though it shamed her to admit it. "I want help tracking him down. Quiet help. Help no one would notice."

Dagult folded his ringed hands. "Perhaps you'd be willing to offer me something. Say you stop pushing so hard for those trade levies?"

"Bastard."

"You're tying my hands with those," Dagult said. "You of all people can't blame me for using what I have when I have it."

Nazra narrowed her eyes. "And you of all people cannot blame me for countering the offer. Give me access to the guard, and I'll burn the evidence I have that you've been collaborating with a certain brigand of the sea who's supposedly reformed—but you and I both know he's not getting those *items* because he's a better bargainer than our honest merchants. You don't, and I swear to Torm, Dagger, I'll bring you down so hard you'll come out in the sewers."

His cheeks flushed an angry red. "Gods *blast* it!" he shouted, slamming a fist down on the desk. "You cannot speak to me that way."

"Right now I'm a dangerous woman to test," Nazra said, not breaking her gaze. "Help me find my son, Lord Neverember. Or test me, and we'll see what happens."

The Open Lord seemed to weigh that. "What do you know about him? This kidnapper."

She watched the Open Lord for a long moment. "Swear to me it's not your doing," she said softly.

He looked appalled. "Mystra's blood, Nazra. That's a fair step beyond my style. I'm no kidnapper. I swear."

She flushed. They'd had their quarrels and their joint machinations, but she should have known better. "He's not from Waterdeep," she said. "He has a plethora of magical trinkets on his person, not the least of which is a collar—the sort you see on old-style plate—with a moonstone as big as a—"

"A deck of cards," Lord Neverember finished.

Nazra raised her eyebrows. "I was going to say a child's hand, but yes. Right on the flat of his chest. You know it?"

Lord Neverember ran his hand over his face. "Your man's wearing a piece of the Songdragon's armor."

Nazra's pulse sped again. "Why?"

"Gods know, Mrays—I mean Nazra. Can't remember what the blasted thing does. It's not supposed to be in his hands though. Unless your man's an eladrin. Some wizard holds the gorget. One of those House of Wonder sorts. Lives near the Market."

"Halnian?" Nazra said, shocked. "Rhinzen Halnian?"

"Sounds right. You know him?"

"He's my son's tutor."

Dagult smiled wickedly. "Well then, I suppose you know where to begin."

The bars were not going to bend, Nestrix had to admit. Not the walls, not the ceiling. She even tried blowing a little lightning into one corner to melt the metal, but succeeded only in shocking herself and burning her lower lip. She sucked on it, considering her options and cursing to herself the hand of fate.

There was a lock on the door—if she rested for a while, she might be able to draw up enough dragonfear to get one of her guards to drop the key. If she had a wire like Tennora's, she might be able to unlatch it by drawing up the thief's memories.

A sudden rush of emotion cut her off that path of thoughts, and she was surprised to find tears welling up in her eyes. Tennora was gone.

"Weeping for some *dokaal*," she muttered and wiped her eyes, but the tears kept coming. Tennora was *gone*, and she had never said she was sorry for running off.

She was sorry now, though she was just as surprised to realize that as she was that she was crying. Who was she? What was she doing, weeping over some *dokaal*?

"Not some *dokaal*," she said aloud, as if to convince herself. "Tennora."

She had gone and made friends with a human. After a hundred years of walking among the *dokaal*,

Clytemorrenestrix, the Terror of the Calim, She Who Thunders in the Sky, had begun to enjoy the company of a human! If Nestrix had been able to tell herself, in the days after the Blue Fire came about, that she would find herself locked in a cage and crying for the loss of a human, she did not doubt her younger self would have laughed.

Nestrix brushed the tears from her cheeks as if they were insects, as if they irritated her.

Tears would not stop Dareun. Tears would not make him suffer as he so richly deserved. But to make him suffer, she would have to escape the cage.

And then what? she thought sourly. Breathe on him and hope you don't die of it? She sank down onto the crate, mired in despair. She would be trapped here until Dareun decided to kill her.

She looked down at her hands and smiled viciously at that. She'd take her chance then, if he were foolish enough to try.

A light flickered in the passage that led up to the surface—and went out. Nestrix sneered at it, waiting for Dareun to come striding down the passageway, smug as a red dragon on a mountaintop.

The light did not return, and neither Dareun nor his colorful *lovac* appeared from the shadows. Nothing came down the dark path.

But something had undeniably been there. Nestrix cursed her feeble eyes, unable to pierce the gloom. If not Dareun or his *lovac*, then what? One of the city's soldiers? A creature of the tunnels?

The light flicked on again, like the tail of a firefly, and briefly illuminated a woman in leather armor.

Nestrix racked her mind, but couldn't remember a woman in jacks among Dareun's minions. An adventurer then, she thought. Well, at least this would be interesting.

The woman in the leather armor stepped into the edge of the glowballs' light. She caught Nestrix's eye and pressed a finger to her lips before stepping back into the shadows.

Nestrix's heart stopped—the woman in the leather armor was Tennora.

She had to purse her lips to stop herself from crying out. Tennora! *Tiamat m'henich*, she was alive.

The guards on either side of the exit hadn't heard Tennora or seen her brief light. They stood, looking bored and dismayed at the task they'd been given. But that wouldn't last long—Tennora couldn't strike both at once.

She needed help.

Nestrix cleared the worry from her thoughts, shut away the trepidation so that it couldn't taint her.

She stood before the bars, watching the guards until they watched her back.

All that fear, all that anger, all the rage at being held like a beast in a cage—she poured it into them. Their eyes widened, and the grip on their weapons tightened. She felt every nerve in her skin screaming at the absence of her scales and the absence of the storms. She gathered that up and poured it into them too.

The guards passed nervous glances to each other. Nestrix drew up the memory of how she had seemed to the thief in the desert, the image of her former self—unstoppable as a sandstorm, rearing up, lighting crackling in her jaws as the wall of Blue Fire rushed in and swallowed them all. Riding the dragonfear the image streaked into the men's heads as well. She screamed—a battle cry, a thunderclap, a keening.

The one on the left started shrieking. The one on the right dropped his weapon, his eyes so wide the whites gleamed all around. He stood there for a moment, knees shaking so hard he could barely stand, before turning tail and bolting down the tunnel.

There was an ugly grunt and a thud.

The second guard stopped screaming, and though he trembled, he turned toward the dark tunnel, sword held high. He glanced over at Nestrix, who was still forcing the dragonfear on him, though the effect was clearly diminishing.

His face contorted in a sneer and he started down the tunnel.

Only to walk straight into one of Tennora's fireballs.

The flames ignited his hair and he screamed again, twisting away from the tunnel.

Tennora ran out of the shadows, holding the other guard's sword, her face white and determined. As the guard beat down the last of the flames, he turned and caught the blade of the sword across the fleshy part of his belly. The armor he wore protected him somewhat, but not from being knocked onto his back.

Still faintly gray, Tennora pulled out her dagger and, planting her knee on his chest, held it to the man's throat.

"Keys," she said.

"I ... I haven't got 'em," he gasped. "The master carries them."

"Give me a good reason to let you live, then," Tennora replied, and oddly, she sounded as if she meant it.

"|-|-|—"

"There's a chemical in here somewhere," Nestrix interjected. "They used it to put me to sleep when they kidnapped me. Knock him out and deal with him later."

Tennora's brown eyes fell gratefully on Nestrix for a moment. She prodded the man with the dagger. "Where's the poison?"

"It's ... it's ... I'll get it for you," he said. "He keeps it in a case, over in those crates there. Let me get it for you. Don't kill me."

Tennora glanced up at Nestrix briefly, then shifted her weight off the man. "All right. Go find it," she said. She made a little gesture with her hand, as if telling him to get up.

"Oh thank you, thank you," the man said, climbing to his feet. "You're doing the right thing. It's right over—Ha!" He pulled his own dagger from his belt and spun on Tennora with a cry of triumph.

"Ziastayix."

He was cut short by the silver bolts that flew from Tennora's pointed finger, catching him in the face twice. Tennora stepped out of his attack and plunged her own dagger into his side. His eyes went wide as he sank to the ground.

For a moment, the only sound was the water dripping from the ceiling of the room.

"You did give him a chance," Nestrix said after a moment. "Everything after that is his own fault for underestimating you."

The young woman's face was still white as a sheet. "I knew he would," she said quietly. "I just hoped. ..."

She looked up at Nestrix again, and all Nestrix's grief and fear came flooding back. Her eyes welled up with tears. "They said they'd killed you," she explained, wiping the tears off. "And I never ... I'm not meant for this! I don't want to care whether you're dead or alive, but I do, Tennora—oh gods, and they said you tried to save me?"

"Sort of," Tennora said. "Calm down. I'll explain once we're out." She pulled a lockpick from her belt and went for the door.

A spark as long as her finger leaped between the lock and the pick as she went to work the mechanism. Tennora jumped back with a hiss.

She tried again, but again the lock sparked.

"Stlarning hrast it," she swore. "It won't quit!"

Tennora took the lock in her hand—nothing happened. "It's charmed," she said. "We need the key."

Nestrix frowned. "Check the guards. The one might have been lying."

Tennora dragged the dead man in from the tunnel and searched both guards' pockets and belt pouches, even unbuckled their armor in case the key hung around either's neck. Nothing. She swore again.

"We have to wait for Dareun then." Tennora looked at the bodies lying on the ground. "I'll hide them for now. When he comes back, we can work out where the keys are and get you out."

"No," Nestrix said, grabbing her by the arm. "You need to leave. That *henich* may be a wyrmling with a bad temper, but he has enough power to back that up. He'll kill you, and he won't fall for the same tricks his *lovacs* did."

Tennora slipped out of Nestrix's hold. "I'm terribly sorry," she said, "but you don't get much say in the matter. You're in there, I'm out here, and I'm not leaving without you." She picked up the first guard's ankles. "Also, I don't know how to get out of here, so they'd be on me in a few hours anyway."

One at a time, she hauled the two minions behind the piles of crates, repositioning the boxes so it wouldn't look as if they'd been moved.

Hells—the smell of their blood was still thick in the room. That had to be fixed. Tennora gave the crates a last shove into position and returned to stand in front of the door, studying the lock.

"Get as far to the side as you can," Nestrix said.

Tennora stayed standing directly in Nestrix's range. "What are you going to do?"

"Burn off the smell of blood. Move out of the way."

"No," Tennora said. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Not as badly as Dareun will hurt us both if he finds his men dead. We don't have a chance of deceiving him while it smells like this." Nestrix pointed over to the wall behind the crates. "Over there."

Tennora scowled and stood in front of Nestrix as if she were going to argue again, but after a moment she relented and squeezed between the cage and the crates, into the corner farthest from Nestrix's range.

"Stop your ears," Nestrix said. "It will be louder down here."

Her stomach quivered—it was going to hurt; there was no avoiding it. She drew several deep breaths to calm herself and find the node of magic that remained, tingling in the back of her throat. For a moment she felt normal, as if her neck were long and sturdy, her throat call used against the lightning. When the tingling became almost unbearable, she drew hard on the frayed Weave that floated through her.

The clap of thunder pounded her ears before her mouth could burn. Her throat—and then her whole body—droned with the lightning. For the moment before it hurt, Clytemorrenestrix remembered what it was like to ride the storms.

Then she burned.

She collapsed, shattered, to the ground, as Tennora shouted her name. Every breath seared, every muscle refused to comply with the merest demands. She lay still and waited for the slow creep of magic to soothe away her

wounds—if the Spellplague had left her vulnerable in her own body, at least it granted her this balm.

When she stirred, the smell of lightning hung in the room, bare and faintly metallic, and there was no trace on the air of the meaty odor of blood.

"Are you all right?" Tennora said. She was kneeling at the door of the cage, eyes like saucers.

Nestrix coughed and sat up. "As right as expected. Did I break the lock?"

Tennora prodded the keyhole with a pick—the same spark. "No such luck."

Nestrix stared at the lockpicks, the sight of them overlaid by the memory of other picks in unfamiliar hands, the thieves short-fingered ones, then her own darker ones. The locks coming undone, click by click.

"Oh," she said softly.

Tennora gave her an alarmed look.

"Give me the picks."

"You don't know how to use them," Tennora said.

"Give me the picks." She reached out to hold the lock, and studied it. "Do you believe the hunter?" she asked.

Tennora shrugged. "He makes some compelling arguments," she said, "but he doesn't have all the answers. So I don't think I do. But I also don't think it matters. Whether or not you were a dragon."

"I was," Nestrix said. "And it seems I wasn't."

She told her the story of the Blue Fire and the thief in the desert—the thief whose thoughts rang among her own. The memories that rose up like shipwrecks after a hurricane, the changing face that she'd only recently put a name to. As she spoke, it was as if a weight had been drawn up off her shoulders, and though Tennora's eyes widened as Nestrix spoke, Nestrix was glad she had told her.

"So, if it soothes your thoughts, I don't ... always remember whether I killed someone or not. Sometimes the memories overwhelm me. I'm not certain it's always myself doing it."

"Like the wizard?"

"No," Nestrix said, "I definitely killed him."

Tennora frowned. "And you think she can tell you how to pick the locks?"

"No—listen to me. She is me. I know how to pick the locks." Tennora still looked confused. "Give me the picks you'd use."

Tennora picked up the lock again and peered inside. From her stash she took out three wires and the flat stick. "These. Probably. The mechanism's a funny shape."

Nestrix chose one of the wires at random and slid it into the lock. The hum of electricity pulsed through her bones, but if she held the pick tightly, she found she could manipulate it.

Nestrix picked up the flat stick and was suddenly assaulted by the memory of a similar tool being held over the bright flames of a fire. *This will hurt, he says, and then the wide handle of the turner against the cut on her belly,*

the one that won't stop bleeding, and the smell of blood boiling and she screams—

Nestrix threw the tool to the ground before she could stop herself.

"Hey there, watch it!"

"I'm not used to it, all right?" she shouted. "That wasn't the right memory." She picked up another one, the thin point bent into a long curve. She remembered the pick in her hand, tracing the tip of it along a man's tanned arm making him fidget and want to grab her, *Gralik who is Tantlevgithus and she who is Lyra and they switch back and forth, blue scales and golden skin and brown hair and black hair and blonde, that night in the desert, on the still-warm rocks—*

She dropped the pick, stunned by the sudden, inopportune longing. "Damn it." "Are you sure you have the memory?"

"It's in there. I've seen it." She pointed to the flat tool. "That goes in, and then the thin ones work up against the top and find the moving bits."

Tennora nodded. "More or less. Maybe you just have to try it."

Nestrix wrapped her arms around her shoulders. "Every time I pick up one of those tools, all I see are her memories. It's as if she's taking me over."

"I thought you said she was you."

"I don't know!" Nestrix shouted. "I don't know, and I don't like her changing things!"

"All right." Tennora blew out a long breath. "If you can't do it, we have to get the key."

"How do you possibly think you're going to manage that?" Nestrix said.

"I haven't thought of how yet." Her brow puckered. "We'll have to kill him, I think." "Really? You?"

Tennora gave her a withering look. "I took care of the two guards when I had to."

"I noticed," Nestrix said. "Why the change of heart?"

"They hurt you, hurt me. He's going to do something to undermine the city. We can't let that happen."

"Then they don't count."

Tennora shuddered a little. "Agreed. I wish we knew what exactly he planned to do. If we could stop him ..."

Nestrix shook her head. "It's folly to guess at a *taaldarax's* end goal, but whatever he plans, there's a child involved." She told Tennora what Dareun had said.

"Mystra's bones," Tennora said. "Whose child?"

Nestrix shrugged. "He didn't say."

"Well, could you guess? Were there clues?"

Nestrix shook her head. "Remember, I can count the number of *dokaal* I know and recognize on one claw. He could have painted a portrait and it would mean nothing. But ... he said, 'I feel as if I could unmask a hundred lords tonight' after he put on your collar." She gave Tennora what she thought might be a sympathetic look. "It was a good try,

by the way," she said, even though it wasn't. But Tennora couldn't have known she had to think two steps beyond a *taaldarax*, even a brash, inexperienced one such as Dareun.

But for some reason, Tennora's face broke into a grin. "No, it's not—"

Something prickled at Nestrix's spine. "Hush."

There was a low *clank* from the tunnel that led into the lair. Andareunarthex was returning.

"Get behind the crates," she hissed at Tennora. To her credit, the girl jumped to her feet without asking questions and squeezed alongside the cage, behind the boxes that had transported Dareun's treasure.

Nestrix slipped the lockpicks into the pocket of her apron, brushed off her skirts, and stood, staring directly down the tunnel as her opponent came into view. Behind him, a half-elf wyrmling—a *child*, she corrected herself—struggled in his grip. Nestrix was startled to realize she'd seen him before—he was the boy in the boot shop, whose feet had grown too much. Trailing them came Ferremo and two more minions.

Dareun halted and looked around, marking the absence of each guard in turn. His eyes fell on Nestrix sitting calmly on the empty box in her cage, her cape arrayed over her shoulders like folded wings. He stormed across the room, dragging the little boy behind him.

Oh you *henich achuakosj*, she thought. I will revel in your fall.

"What have you done with my men?" he said.

Nestrix shrugged. "They ran off. One would think you'd better inure your pieces to the dragonfear, *taaldarax*." She gave him an insolent smile. "And me not even at my strongest."

He narrowed his eyes and stood closer to the bars of the cage, but he didn't break away from her gaze. "You're lying."

Nestrix smirked at him. "Dragon Queen, but you're addled. What do you think I did? Managed to escape long enough to kill your men and dispose of the bodies, only to climb back into my cage? I guarantee you, no matter how stupid you'd like to think I am, if I could get out, I'd be glad to leave your *lovacs*' bloody bodies behind and you wouldn't ever see me again."

He stood a moment longer, staring her down. Nestrix didn't flinch.

A low growl thrummed in Dareun's throat. He turned away, pulling a key from his pocket and unlocking the door to the cage. Quicker than Nestrix could move, he twisted the little boy's arm, forcing him into the cage with her. He slammed the door.

"Do quit your crying, young Master Mrays," Dareun said in dulcet tones. "This woman is a very fierce dragon, and she might just gobble you up if you don't."

The boy looked up at Nestrix with alarm in his eyes and bit his trembling lip. A bruised and swelling cut on his cheekbone oozed blood and, judging by the dark streaks, had been for some time. The little boy pulled his legs up to his chest with a whimper. Fear nudged at Nestrix's heart—he looked so like a wyrmling hiding in a hole.

Dareun turned and caught Nestrix's eye. He gave her a cruel grin. "Don't worry," he whispered as he passed the cage. "Even if you leave him be, the blindfin will have him soon enough."

SEVENTEEN

Tennora pressed herself into the shadowy crevice between two crates, hardly daring to breathe as Dareun stormed into the cavern, dragging a small boy. Ferremo and a pair of men she hadn't seen before sauntered in behind him.

She listened as Dareun accosted Nestrix, demanding to know what she'd done with the two guards. All the while she stared in the direction of their bodies hidden behind the crates just beyond her feet. The feeling of her dagger slicing through the first one's trachea—the sound of the blood spraying—turned her stomach. Her hand was resting on the dagger.

What had her mother thought the first time she'd had to kill an attacker? She didn't wonder any longer if she had—even the easy world Tennora had grown accustomed to was rife with dangers. Merely stepping to one side of it had left her with two men's blood on her hands and the intention of adding more. If she didn't die first.

Dareun opened the door of the cage and swung the little boy in. He warned him that Nestrix was a dragon who might eat him. "Don't worry," he whispered. "Even if you leave him be, the blindfin will have him soon enough."

Tennora closed her eyes and fought back the shudder that threatened to rack her at the thought of the blindfin, their sucker-mouths gnawing away at her skin. And poor Veron ... Despite their cross-purposes, she did hope he'd made it out. Preferably out to the tunnel that led to the lair, his crossbow intact and ready.

Nestrix squatted down beside the little boy. "You were the boy in the boot shop," she said gently and too softly to be heard much farther than where Tennora sat. "Master Mrays?" He nodded, his eyes still wide. "Is your mother safe?" Nestrix asked.

"I ... I think so. Saer." He swallowed as if it hurt him, and added in hardly more than a squeak, "Please don't eat me!"

"I do not eat little boys," Nestrix said. "They taste bad. Especially when they live in cities. Did the man tell you what he means to do?"

"He ... he said to the man who took me from my bed that he thinks my mother will give him what he wants."

"And did he say what that was?"

The boy shook his head. "He said ... he said she would not want to give it up, but she would have no choice. And the man with the ..." He started to cry a little. "The man with the knives said they should get insur-insur—"

"Insurance?" Nestrix said, setting a hand on the boy's shoulder.

He nodded. "Then he took one of his knives and poked me in the armpit and asked if I knew where Mama keeps the staff."

Cold horror flooded Tennora's body. *I could unmask a hundred lords tonight*, Dareun had said.

"What's the staff?" Nestrix asked.

"It's a secret," the boy said. "It's a special staff. I only saw it once. I wasn't supposed to. The Lord Dagger and the

wizard who died gave it to Mama, and she hid it. With magic."

The Open Lord, the Blackstaff, and Goodwoman Mrays. And a staff that had to be hidden. By a lord in a mask. That a dragon dearly wanted.

The lodestone is the first lord's gift.

Blood of Mystra, she thought.

Dareun meant to take the dragonstaff of Ahghairon.

If Dareun got hold of the dragonstaff, the dragonward would be all but meaningless. The wielder of the dragonstaff could allow certain dragons to pass through the city without being harmed by the magic of the ward. In that way the Masked Lords who ruled Waterdeep could allow helpful dragons in and keep the dangerous ones out.

With the dragonstaff in Dareun's hands, he could rescind any and all such allowances and give himself free rein in Waterdeep. All dragons in the Great Game would be blocked by the dragonward from approaching his lair, and Dareun would have his claws in the heart of the city.

Especially if he held hostage the son of a Masked Lord influential enough to have been charged with keeping the dragonstaff.

It was no longer just about helping Nestrix. If Tennora couldn't stop Dareun, the whole city was in danger.

She shifted enough so that she could see Dareun standing with his back to her, leaning heavily on the chair beside him. The gorget was protecting him from the powers of the dragon-ward, but it could not undo the damage the

mythal had already wrought, and he looked exhausted. The key to the cage dangled from a ring in his left hand. So close, and yet so far. She might be able to snatch it from him, if she was as quick as she had ever been in her life, but she'd never get it to Nestrix before his lackeys attacked her.

Tennora looked back at Nestrix, and with her hand made the shape of a lock. Nestrix laid a hand on the lockpicks in her pocket. She'd need Dareun to be distracted if she was going to attempt to pick the locks.

Which meant Tennora had to do something profoundly reckless.

Nazra wanted to storm Rhinzen Halnian's tower herself, but she settled for sending Jorik over with a troop of his bodyguards to meet the Watch captain—and for thinking of the things she would do to the man who stole her son. If it was the eladrin's doing, she'd see him hang from the Troll Wall.

"Mistress Mrays," Agnea said calmly, "you'll wear a hole in the floor pacing like that."

"Let it wear," she snapped, and continued pacing.

Agnea spoke again a few moments later. "You know we'll find him."

Nazra didn't answer, didn't even look up at her chamberlain. The anger in her was all that kept her on her feet and alert. To address the idea that there was even another possibility was unthinkable.

It had been four hours since the man in green velvet had vanished from her garden. Since then, Nazra had her servants sweep the house for clues, and sent Agnea out to politely inquire of the party guests as they left whether they had seen a young man in a green velvet suit, as he had left behind his overcloak. No one remembered seeing him until just before he escorted Nazra out into the gardens, and no one had spotted him afterward. It was as if he appeared out of thin air and vanished once more into it.

Moreover, beyond the bodies in the nursery and the blood on the wall, there was no trace that anyone had broken into her home. She had sent for a wizard to feel the wards out—the wards that bastard Halnian had devised—and find how the kidnappers had made their way in, but no one had arrived yet.

"Why is this taking so long?" Nazra said.

"Perhaps Master Halnian put up a fight," Agnea said mildly, a wicked smile on her lips. "I think Jorik would relish the chance to compel Master Halnian, should he prove unwilling, and it might take longer than he intended."

From the entryway came the sounds of Nazra's bodyguards returning. It took every ounce of self-control Nazra had in her to wait for them to come to her. Running through the hallways tearing her hair would not do—later, alone, but not now. Now she needed to seem in complete control.

Jorik strode into the office. "You will never believe this, saer," he said.

Nazra ignored him. "Where's Halnian?"

"Trying to survive the night in a cleric's hospice," Jorik said. "And his circumstance doesn't bode well for him. His tower came down. The Watch was already there, trying to get him out and to safety."

"How does a tower come down on its own?" Agnea said.

"It doesn't," Jorik said. "Two of his apprentices were there. They say he went mad and cast a spell to call down missiles from the sky on them. While he was still in the tower."

"Watching gods," Nazra said. "Are they sure?"

"Um, quite sure, goodwife," a young man's voice came from behind Jorik. Jorik stepped to the side to reveal the two apprentices, a very handsome human boy and an elf girl, standing side by side in the doorway. Both wore the robes of students from the House of Wonder.

"I thought they could check the wards," Jorik explained.

"It was a meteor swarm," the young man said. "And yes, he was most certainly mad by that point. Tennora mentioned some sort of smoke. I expect they will find traces of it on him."

Nazra looked to the young woman. "Smoke?"

She turned red. "Oh no, goodwife. I'm Shava. Tennora ran off. But she did mention some sort of smoke before she left. A ... well, a sort of intoxicant, I think she meant."

"Who is Tennora?" Nazra said. "Why did she run off before the Watch arrived?"

"Another student," Shava answered, but she left the other question hanging.

"Tennora Hedare," the young man said. "Also, I'm Cassian Lafornan; it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Yes, of course." Nazra turned to Agnea. "Hedare?"

"A titled family," the chamberlain replied. "Descendants of a far-shipper who did rather well in wool and curios—I believe the present Lord Hedare's grandfather, but I'd have to check. I'd also have to check who Tennora Hedare might be, but she's certainly not the current Lady Hedare if she's one of Rhinzen Halnian's pupils. The current lady is of a certain age."

"Oh no," Cassian chimed in. "Her uncle and aunt are the Lord and Lady Hedare."

"Could they be connected to this?"

Agnea made a face. "I doubt it. The Hedares are the sort of bright-coin nobles who want more establishment, not less."

"But a younger lady is a die not yet thrown." Nazra turned back to the two students. "Why did she run off?" Shava turned a brighter shade of red and clamped her mouth shut.

"To be perfectly frank," Cassian said, "I think she may have gone a little mad herself. She was sneaking around the tower, and I believe she stole some of Master Halnian's priceless artifacts. I saw at least one in her—"

Nazra sprang forward and seized him by the shoulders, all pretense of control shed. "What? What artifact? What did it look like?"

Cassian's eyes widened. "Some piece of armor. With a big moonstone."

"The Songdragon's gorget," Shava piped up. "Master Halnian used to keep it in his offices."

Nazra released the young man, her thoughts racing around each other, trying to trap the puzzle of names and motives together. Tennora Hedare, Rhinzen Halnian, the gorget of the Songdragon and Antoum ...

"Think carefully, the both of you. Have you ever seen a man, a man with red hair and possibly a green velvet cape, lots of rings on his fingers, around Master Halnian or young Lady Hedare?" They both shook their heads.

"Although," Cassian amended, "Tennora has taken up with some strange people lately. A half-orc fellow and a very rude Tethyrian woman."

Nazra's heart folded in on itself.

"Tethyrian?" Jorik said. "Is she very tall? Black hair, strange eyes?" "Yes. That sounds right."

The woman in the cobbler's shop. Oh Hells, Hells, she should have seen this coming! She had known down to her bones that something wasn't right.

"This is quite a conspiracy," Jorik murmured.

"But where is he?" Nazra demanded. "Where is my son?" She turned back to Cassian and Shava. "I know you two

have had what I dearly hope will prove to have been the worst night of your lives. But I need your help. Where does Tennora live?"

"The God Catcher," Cassian said. "It's not too far from here."

"The fallen statue by the market?" He nodded. "Good, show Jorik and the others there. Stay out of their way, but find her. I need to know what she did with that collar. You, girl." She pointed at Shava. "I want you to check the wards on the doorways until the full wizard shows up."

She looked up at Jorik. He and Agnea were the two people she trusted with all her secrets—and her life besides. They were her eyes and ears, the hands that reached farther than she dared from her perceived position.

"If you see that bastard, don't kill him. Wait until we have Antoum. Promise me."

Jorik nodded. "Absolutely, saer."

"And the girl ... you find her, you bring her to me. I don't care what she tells you—I want to hear it from her lips."

Lying behind the crate several miles away and far beneath Nazra Mrays's feet, Tennora felt a calm overtake her as she realized she was very likely about to get herself killed.

Once more she shifted enough to catch sight of Nestrix, watching Dareun and fingering the tools in her pocket. Nestrix looked as if she'd much rather be on Tennora's side

of the bars and ready to dispatch Dareun—possibly by clawing his gut open with her fingernails.

After a moment, Nestrix's gaze shifted to the gap between the crates where Tennora hid. By hand gestures and mouthed words, Tennora let Nestrix know she was going to try a spell and that Nestrix should be ready to pick the lock.

Nestrix looked drawn, but she nodded. She leaned over to Antoum and whispered something to him. Tennora said a little prayer to Tymora that Nestrix was right about the memories and not simply mad as Veron had said.

Tennora wrapped her hands around her staff. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her thoughts, to focus only on the shifting remnants of the Weave and how to get bursts of acid out of it.

"Ferremo, go find those two fools," Dareun said. He snorted. "I will show them fear."

Tennora held her hands over her ears, but their voices filtered through.

"Master," Ferremo said, "that seems a reckless step." Dareun turned on the *lovac*. "What?"

"The goodwoman is likely to send guards searching. The bounty hunter is still in the city, and he knows about us as well. It doesn't bode well."

The silence was taut as a wire. "And how would they find us, Ferremo?" Dareun asked. "Have you been talking to someone?"

Tennora gave a quiet grunt of frustration. She thought of a different spell, one she knew as well as the stairs of the God Catcher. It wouldn't hurt anyone, but it might distract them long enough for Nestrix to escape. The lines of it uncoiled. She focused on the specifics, the sounds and the distance. *"Tumtiespurelupwol"* The air before her seemed to thicken.

"Not I, master. I merely meant they are not fools. If we have left anything—"

"Have we left anything?" Dareun said. "You seem awfully concerned—"

The sound of a bugle blast rang through the sewers—distant, but not distant enough to stop Dareun from seizing Ferremo by the shirtfront.

"What is that?" he snarled.

"The Watch horns," Ferremo said. "I warned you."

"Turn to, my boys," Tennora said, and a man's voice boomed the same words out of the sewer tunnels. "We have them cornered. Weapons ready! On my word!"

Dareun dropped Ferremo and stormed to the open tunnel, his hands swarming with fluttering shadows. Tennora darted her eyes to Nestrix, who had pulled loose the picks and was furiously working at the lock. The look in her eyes was distant and vaguely pained.

Before the entrance to the tunnel, Dareun raised his hands and cast a stream of dark magic into the passageway with the roar of an enchantment. "Finn, Aenotis—you guard this way. The darkness will slow them down. Take them down as they enter."

The man closest to Tennora started to move, just as she stood, knocking the stack of crates over. He fell back, out of the way of the falling boxes but into the reach of Tennora's ready dagger. She slid the blade up into the man's rib cage, careful to avoid his bones. The dagger slid back out with ease.

She sprang over the minion's body, pulse pounding, senses screaming. Ferremo stepped back, stunned at her sudden appearance. Dareun too looked surprised, but only for a moment before rage overtook his features.

The carvestar flew from Tennora's fingers toward the soft part of his throat; it missed and sank into his shoulder instead. She cursed and took up another, but Dareun had taken up his cane. The circular blade still protruding from his body, he raised up the cane and released a blast of crackling purple fire.

Tennora felt the spell as it began to build and, trusting her instincts, leaped out of the way. The stream of eldritch power coursed past her, through the bars of the cage, and shattered against the wall. Mold sprayed across the room at the impact.

Tennora hardly noticed. She had stepped out of Dareun's spell and into the arms of Ferremo Magli. Whatever surprise she had given him, he had shaken it off and drawn his quick, vicious knives.

"You're supposed to be dead," he said.

"That's what comes of being sloppy," she replied. She twisted around the strike of the first knife, forcing it off her armor.

The second caught her between the harness and the cuirass and slipped through the muscles of her abdomen, piercing her belly. Pain raced across her nerves, and she clutched her belly around the blade.

She looked up into Ferremo's laughing eyes, all too aware that a wound to the gut would fester and rot. She slid off his blade. Blood seeped into the space between her skin and her armor.

I am dead, she thought.

"Little *Iovac*," Dareun chided. He pulled the carvestar from his shoulder and threw it to the ground. "You shouldn't have returned. By the cold and endless void, by the fires unimaginable that pierce it, so shall the powers of Sualocin pierce your eternal soul."

A searing cold gripped Tennora's bones, colder than the water of the harbor, and a unfeeling voice seemed to lick her ears with a whispered, alien tongue whose foul promises sank right into her brain. A pounding like a forgeworks rang in her ears. It took only a moment, but an eternity seemed to wrap itself around her, holding her in place.

The spell that chased Dareun's curse sent waves of blinding white light searing across her skin—not hot, but unspeakably cold. It froze her to the spot, muscles aching, leather stiff—and worst, her lungs were too cold to draw a deep breath.

Ferremo took one of his blades and ran its edge along the stays of her collar, severing them one by one, his eyes dancing with impending violence. She shivered but could not move.

Breathe, hrast it, breathe! she shouted in her mind. You're not dead yet!

"Ziastsuianrap" she wheezed.

A dozen daggers winked into being around Ferremo, swooping in to slice his skin. They would not go deeper, but they harried the assassin and drove him back, scratching out Tennora's fury on his face.

Dareun's body shivered with the makings of a blast similar to the first. The other minion came at her, club in hand. She still couldn't feel her feet, couldn't get them to move. He hefted the club.

"Finn," Dareun ordered, "get out of the way."

The minion swung his weapon, but the interrupting order made him pull back, just enough for Tennora to dodge the heavy weapon. When Dareun released the spell, it burned over both Finn's and Tennora's skin. Finn cried out as he was thrown back toward the cage.

Nestrix caught the weight of his body as she stepped from her prison. Eyes aflame, she took him by the neck and wrenched it hard against the rest of his body. It broke with a snap.

"Come now, wyrmling. Throwing away a piece? That was just foolish."

Nestrix had caught the look in Tennora's eye—a desperate, panicked look. She had heard what the boy said, and something about it frightened her. She wanted Nestrix to try to pick the lock—she would distract Dareun.

Nestrix's stomach clenched. She touched the shape of the picks sitting in her pocket—if she couldn't remember, they were all doomed.

But the look on Tennora's face said she knew that and she would do whatever it was she planned to do anyway. Nestrix nodded. She leaned in close to the boy.

"Little man," she whispered, "I want you to stop your ears and close your eyes. This will be hard, but it will be over in a moment."

"What are you going to do?" he whispered back, tears still rolling down his cheeks.

"Escape," she said.

When the bugle rang out, for a moment she believed the ruse, and hope and fear overran her in equal turn. The susurrus of Tennora's whispers matching the rallying cries shook her from her thoughts, and she withdrew the picks.

"Eyes and ears, little man," she reminded Antoum. Trembling, he did as he was told.

She took up the tools and, one eye on Dareun, slipped them into the keyhole. The boy's body sheltered her from the assassin's view, but he was no fool. If Ferremo looked too closely, he was sure to figure her out.

She gripped the lockpicks hard enough to make her hands ache, as the charge within the lock shoved them away and sent a thrill of electricity through her body. She concentrated on the weight of the tools, the shape of the handles, the feel of the metal.

She remembered shaping her first lockpick, from a scrap of tin and a lava stone, *shaving off the metal layer by layer, she holds it up to her eye—blue, no, brown—and studies the curve, smooth shallow—*

Nestrix shook her head and drove the memory away. She concentrated on her hands holding the picks. She tilted the wire up into the tumblers.

She remembered using a plank of wood, wedging the end under a stone, and the little dark-haired girl, *push down, Wenda, push down and the stone goes up, rolls a little more —*

Gods hrast it! Who was Wenda? Nestrix glanced up. Dareun had cast a spell into the blackness of the passageway and was ordering his men to watch the entrance.

She remembered creeping along a dark passage, her foot coming down on the wrong tile, *lightning blooms out of nothing, out of nowhere, and shakes my bones, burns my skin—*

The crates toppled over, clipping one of the men Dareun had called. The sound drove Nestrix from her thoughts. Tennora stood, her features set in a fierce mask, her blade dancing as if she'd held it all her life. All eyes went to Tennora, Nestrix's included. She turned back to the lock, willing herself not to think about what was going to happen if she didn't break free.

Are you punishing me? Nestrix thought. You want me to die too? Without me you are lost, thief. Gone. Scattered to the four winds. Give me what we both need.

The memories shifted. A child, a girl with black hair and blue eyes, watched the desert as the Spellplague ripped across it. *Her hair turns blonde and then black and then she flickers into the shape of a blue wyrm—Wenda, and that is how she died. Or didn't die, and a hundred years spin by and the mystery remains. She is gone to her grave one way or another, but the mystery haunts the haunting. ...*

Give me what I need and I will find out what happened to her, Nestrix thought. I don't have the time for your nonsense.

Nestrix—Nestrix the woman—with a shard of glass or bruised fists or a broken plank or the storm that rises out of her belly fighting, fighting because she is angry, because she is lonely, because she is lost, and sometimes the blood and the bruises drive the anger and the pain away and sometimes they don't. Sometimes it isn't Nestrix who gets into these fights but a woman with honey blonde hair who strangled to death a long time ago. Neither is sated. Neither knows where she's going. Neither is truly alive. Better to be dead.

You selfish beast, Nestrix thought, struggling with the lock-picks. You miss your child? Well, so do I. So does this boy's mother miss him. It doesn't entitle you to doom us all.

Nestrix taunting Dareun—What do I care? I have nothing left.

She looked up at Tennora, flicking her throwing blades across the room, her face pale.

A bolt of energy seared across the room, nearly catching Nestrix's ear. She threw herself to the side and into the boy as it passed, smacking against the wall beyond. Scraps of mold sprayed outward, as well as shattered rock. A piece the

size of the boy's heart tumbled to a stop by her knees. Antoum's eyes went wide.

"Closed," Nestrix reminded him, and she picked up the rock in both hands. If the thieves' memories wouldn't help, she'd do it her way.

The edges of the rock cut her palms as she smashed it against the body of the lock. The metal didn't give as easily as she hoped, and the shock of it trembled up her arm. Again and again she slammed the stone into the lock. The body dented and twisted. She would never be able to pick the lock now.

Tennora cried out. Nestrix looked up and saw she stood close—too close—to Ferremo, clutching her stomach. Nestrix nearly cried out with her.

She slammed the rock down twice more, the shackle stretching and weakening but refusing to break. It had to break.

Dareun's curse raced across the room. Tennora gasped as it seized her. The spell that followed was colder, crueler than what he'd done before, and the power of it drove a scream from Tennora and forced her to her knees.

"No!" Nestrix shouted. She smashed the rock down again, and—

Here, look here, the old man says, and Nestrix-Lyra looks, and he points to the junction of the body and the shackle opposite the locking mechanism and says, here is the weak spot, this is where the lock is most vulnerable. If you cannot tease it open, break it here.

With all her strength, Nestrix brought the rock down on the corner of the lock. A spatter of electricity burst out, enough to sting the backs of her hands with a dozen tiny burns. Nestrix cast the rock aside and twisted the lock out of its latch. The door opened.

Dareun fired another bolt just as his minion stepped into its path. The man stumbled into her as she surged out the door. Breaking his neck was a matter of instinct, the way she might have snapped a camel or a marlin to stop it from flailing. Her blood pounded like thunder.

Dareun looked up at her, astonished and angry.

"Come now, wyrmling. Throwing away a piece? That was just foolish." She glanced over at Tennora, still on one knee, and at the assassin, who had regained himself and had both knives out and ready. "Ah-ah, *lovac*," she said in a taunting tone. "Step aside. You don't want to be caught in the middle of this."

"She bluffs," Dareun said.

"Of course not," Nestrix said. "I'm mad, remember? Mad enough to use everything in my power to make you two suffer. And I warned you I don't play *xorvintaal*."

Dareun stepped back, building up another spell, waiting for her to attack him with the gods only knew what. Nestrix smiled; as she wasn't a *taaldarax*, she hadn't lost her powers. Ferremo eyed her with a tense curiosity, flipping a knife over and over in his hand.

Tennora sprang up, still clutching her wound with one hand, and slashed Ferremo behind the knee. He shouted as his leg buckled under him and the knife he had been playing with flew loose and clattered to the floor.

Dareun's attention turned to his wounded *lovac* just long enough for Nestrix to bolt across the room and tackle him, her cape fluttering behind her. Whatever spell he had planned fizzled and vanished, and he fought to force her off him.

But Nestrix was stronger. With her battered fists, she cracked the fallen *taaldarax* across the jaw, over and over. In a way, she was mad—mad and wild and fighting like a beast and not a *dokaal*. Gleeful at the chance to harm Dareun, to humiliate him—with his spells and his minions—begging to be released from a weapon as presumably weak as her two fists.

He cried out, and layered beneath the cry was a green dragon's fluty roar. He seized her wrists again and twisted. Nestrix pulled back, and he was suddenly twisting on top of her, slamming her back into the ground. As they fell, she pulled her knee up and punched it into his ribs. He pinned her legs and held them so she could not kick again.

"Ferremo!" he cried. "To me!"

His face contorted with pain. He released Nestrix's left wrist and reached behind himself. With a grunt of pain he pulled a crossbow bolt from his ribs. Nestrix looked over his shoulder.

Mucky and bleeding from a gash to the forehead, the bounty hunter wound the crossbow once more and dropped another bolt into place. "In the name of the crown of Cormyr and the Lords of Waterdeep, lay down your arms." He hesitated for a moment, then added, "Andareunarthex."

EIGHTEEN

Jorik surveyed the wreckage of the apartment once occupied by Tennora Hedare. Papers lay burnt and torn everywhere, not a piece of furniture upright and whole. A fight between two parties had done it, he was certain. Its traces lay in the blast patterns that smeared the opposing walls, the layer stripped away from the tabletop someone had hidden behind. The wizard boy said it had looked like that when he'd seen it last.

"There was a man," he said. "Actually three men and a woman, and the Tethyrian. She was unconscious. The others were attacking Tennora, I think."

Jorik eyed him. "And you didn't think to mention that?" Cassian shook his head. "It's been a very hectic day."

"What did the attackers look like?"

Cassian screwed up his face. "A half-elf woman, rather fetching. She's the one the Watch charged. A blond man with copper eye-teeth. The third fellow—"

"Copper eyeteeth?" Jorik said. "Hrast." He pulled an amulet out from under his shirt and murmured the spell to activate it. "Nazra," he said.

Have you found them?

"Not yet, but we may have found how the kidnappers got in. There's a letter on your desk somewhere. Agnea dropped it off two nights before the party; she'll find it. Don't recall who it's from, but the messenger who dropped it

off is the same one who made a mess of Tennora Hedare's apartments."

You think they used it to get in? The wards should have rejected it.

"I hope it isn't, Nazra," he said. "But the wards wouldn't have noticed anything wrong. We brought it in. I'm so sorry."

Nazra said nothing for a long moment. *It doesn't mean the Hedare girl is innocent.*

"We can pull the half-elf from the Watch's dungeons," he said. "She can tell us who she's working for. Maybe—"

"Oh dear," Cassian said. He was standing in the middle of the room, staring at a spot on the floor. He looked up at Jorik. "I may have forgotten something."

Jorik lowered the amulet. "What?"

"The man who was unconscious wore green velvet. Not a cape, but ... Do you think that might be important?"

"One moment, saer," he said, and tucked the amulet back into his shirt. "Sit," he ordered, pointing at the remaining chair. Cassian backed into it and sat down. Jorik leaned in close.

"Now is not the time to forget things," he said. "There is a life at stake. You said there were four people and the Tethyrian. The man with the copper eyeteeth and a man in green velvet who was unconscious. What. Else. Did. You. See?"

Cassian licked his lips nervously. "The, um, the man with the copper eyeteeth, Tennora threw a little blade at him and

caught him in the leg. He shouted to the half-elf that she ... Her name ... Alina? Alita? He said she should use the favor and she took out a coin of some sort. Then, ah ... then Tennora jumped on her. She doesn't usually do things like that. Anyway, the man caught the coin and dropped it. Then they all vanished."

"And that's it?"

"Yes," he said, then added, "Well, Tennora was upset afterward, saying they'd kidnapped the Tethyrian—Nester, I think she said, or maybe Nestrix? She said that one of them—one of the men, I don't know which—was a dragon. 'A dragon too,' actually. The bounty hunter—"

"Hrast it, boy. When did the bounty hunter come in?"

"During the fight. He and Tennora argued about it. I went for the Watch and for ... I think he's an uncle of Tennora's perhaps. Then Goodwoman Blacklock—she's the landlady—came in. Said the plan had worked and that was the best way to get rid of a dragon. She has strange ideas about the proper use of spells, I think."

Jorik shot to his feet. He pulled out the amulet and activated it again, telling Nazra what Cassian had related.

The plot thickens, she said.

"I don't think the girl is a part of the kidnapper's plans."

Whatever she is, she knows more than we do. Find her.
"You will not find her," a new voice said.

Jorik startled and turned to the window where a creature half woman and half raptor crouched watching him, a pair of enormous wings arched over her head. She bobbed her head

at him the way the falcons in the mews did when presented with a lure.

"You will not find her," she said again, "because she changed the paths." "I beg your pardon?"

Jorik? Nazra's voice asked. *What's going on? Who's there?*

"Tell her I am called Aundra Blacklock," the creature said. "Tennora read it differently. She will fail or she will come back in her own time—but that doesn't stop the storm." She bobbed her head again, more quickly, as if he agitated her and she wanted to chase him off.

"I'm sorry," Jorik said. "Goodwoman Blacklock, we don't mean to trespass. But it's imperative we find Tennora right away."

She stopped and turned her head to the side. She blinked slowly. "I will help you, I suppose, but you cannot become used to it."

"Never," Jorik said, and he meant it.

Tennora had never been so glad in all her life to see someone as she was when Veron strode into the chamber, crossbow high. Ferremo jabbed at her again, piercing the muscle above her shoulder and wrenching the blade down. She finished her spell with a yelp. An explosion of colored lights filled the space between them. Not as bright or as painful as she'd hoped, but enough to drive the assassin back a few feet, still limping.

"Shoot the *lovac*!" Nestrix yelled. A bolt whizzed across the room and struck the wall.

Tennora's own wound was still seeping blood, and the loss of it was slowing her down, dizzying her. Her vision swam and her ears were ringing. All her focus she put into staying on her feet and keeping Ferremo and his knife away.

But every spell, every careful attack, used up a little more of what she had left. She could hardly keep her arm up and the dagger in her hand.

And bit by bit, Ferremo was cutting her down. A slash here, a stab there—he was toying with her. And though she had bloodied him as well, leaving him limping, squinting, and wiping blood from his chin, he would fall long after she had.

She pulled her hand from her wound long enough to make it glitter with the beginnings of a spell. Ferremo slashed at her upraised wrist. With a quick turn, she stuck him with the dagger under the arm as he slashed. He hissed and pressed that arm down over the wound.

"Isn't this fun?" he panted, his eyes wild and bright. He lunged forward again, but Tennora twisted away to make the thicker leather catch the knife. Quick as an eel, he turned the weapon and slammed the hilt into the armor near her wound. Tennora cried out.

Another crossbow bolt sang across the room, sinking into Ferremo's hip. His eyes went wide with pain.

"Put the blades down," Veron shouted.

Ferremo yanked the bolt free of his joint. He slipped around Tennora so she stood between him and the crossbow.

As she started to move out of the way, his hand lashed out and grabbed her by the braid, yanking her close. He bent her sword arm behind her back and held her body close to him like a shield.

"Go ahead!" Ferremo shouted back, his breath close and hot against her ear. His weight leaned on her, saving his wounded leg. "Send us some love."

Veron froze, anger and fear congealing his features, but Tennora boiled over.

She stomped down hard on Ferremo's foot. The soles of her own boots were soft, but she struck him across the toes with her heel. His grip loosened as he cried out, and she pulled her arm away from him. She reached back and shoved her palm up against his face.

"*Ziastayix*" she gasped, her vision crumbling to gray around the edges. He shrieked as his skin and hair scorched, the scented oil burning with a smell like pinesap. The twang of Veron's crossbow sounded as she pulled herself free of Ferremo.

Tennora fell to her hands and knees, the blood still oozing from the wound beneath her armor sapping what remained of her strength.

Nestrix and Dareun were off the ground and circling each other, Dareun's hands tracing the shapes of his wild magic, Nestrix beginning to crackle with lightning. As Dareun came around to face his wounded *Iovac*, he stopped and glanced around the room.

"You are alone, wyrmling," Nestrix said, her voice crackling in Tennora's ears. Dareun's eyes narrowed, and his hands came up to cast.

He shouted another spell, and the shadows of the room condensed around him. He flickered, and his image skipped across the room and into the cage swaddled in the darkness. Antoum Mrays, still huddled in a ball, looked up as Dareun appeared before him. He screamed as Dareun grabbed him by the arm and twisted his ring. The two of them vanished.

"No!" Tennora cried out, but she couldn't even hear her own voice. The grayness closed over her eyes and she collapsed into it.

Tennora's eyes fluttered open to see Veron holding her head up and pressing another vial to her lips.

"You need to start carrying some of your own," he said. She drank the potion gratefully and let him help her up, still aching but no longer bleeding.

Nestrix stood beside her, tense and worried. Ferremo was pressed into a corner, watching and breathing unevenly.

"Don't do that again," Nestrix said.

"I'll do my best," Tennora said wryly as Veron pulled her to her feet. She looked around the chamber. "Hrast it. He's gone?"

"Not quite," Nestrix said. She stepped toward Ferremo.

Wounded, Ferremo held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "It's not me you want," he said, panting. "It's him. I'm just the lackey."

Nestrix kept coming. "You're right. He can see through your eyes, can't he? Hear through your ears?"

Ferremo nodded nervously, hands still raised. "He will know if you—"

Nestrix seized Ferremo around the throat and slammed him against the brick wall. Ferremo twisted and kicked. His face turned plum.

"Then listen and understand this, wyrmling," she hissed, leaning in close. "Your days are numbered. You marked yourself the moment you took that boy. If his dam cannot find you, I will hunt you down for her, and you will regret ever breaking through your shell."

Ferremo tried to cough, but Nestrix's grip compressed his throat. Words struggled from his lips. "You ... can ... try ... *ulhar*." "Oh, I'll do it. I'll watch you die."

Ferremo's mouth twisted into a smirk. "He's ... laughing."

"Tell me where he's gone and I'll let you live."

"He ... wouldn't."

"Last chance, *lovac*. Where is the child?"

Ferremo's mouth curved into a gruesome smile. "Gone."

Tennora had heard enough. "Nestrix," she said. Nestrix looked back at her without releasing Ferremo. "He's not going to tell us anything. Are you?" she said to Ferremo.

Ferremo's smile widened, and he said nothing.

Nestrix bared her teeth. "Do not ask me to let him go."

"No," Tennora said, though nausea rose in her stomach. "Hold him still." Rage, bright and hot, filled Tennora as she sank her mother's dagger between Ferremo's ribs. His eyes

went wide. Bright red blood poured from his chest and pumped out in heavy goutts over Tennora's knuckles. His lashes fluttered, and a last wheeze escaped his lips before he trembled and went slack. Tennora pulled the dagger from his body, her hands shaking.

"That was ... sudden," Nestrix said, sounding—for once—surprised.

"No it wasn't," Tennora said quietly. "He almost killed me three times over. He kidnapped that boy. He kidnapped you. He started it. I wanted to end it." She looked up at an amused Nestrix. "I'm not making a habit of it. But I gave him plenty of chances."

"Of course you did," Nestrix said. "Anyway, he was on his way already. You did him a favor."

"Stop talking about it."

"All right," Nestrix said. "But can you do it again?"

"I—"

"Stop right there." Standing in the center of the chamber, Veron watched them over the sights of his crossbow. He took a step forward. "I've been tracking you a long time, Clytemorrenestrix."

Nestrix looked him up and down. "And who are you? The bounty hunter the *henich* spoke of?" "I am. I've been sent to bring you back to Cormyr to answer for the death of—"

"The wizard," she finished. "You should be glad I killed him."

"Not now, Veron," Tennora said. "We need to find the boy. Dareun's planning to bring down the city."

Nestrix stepped toward him. "You need me right now, hunter," she said. "Tennora is clever enough to find him, I think, but he's no mere warlock. Not with that collar."

Veron didn't lower the crossbow. "And how do I know you aren't working with the ... other dragon."

"You watched me kill his *lovac*," Nestrix said. "What more do you need? While we talk, that child is in danger."

"Tell me where he's headed."

Nestrix frowned. "To a second lair, probably. He wants something from the boy's dam. The boy is a bargaining piece—he won't take him back to his mother until he has what he wants."

"Where's his second lair?"

Nestrix shook her head. "I don't know that. That's why we need to find him."

"The antiquary's," Tennora said. "Anywhere else is out of the city."

"That's true," Nestrix said. "The antiquary's is to hold his seed hoard, his treasure. This place is to recover—that ward of yours is weaker at this edge. He doesn't need anything else here—he probably made his moves from his main lair until now. That could be anywhere."

"But he'd have to transform or teleport to get there," Tennora finished. "He can't walk down the street dragging the unwilling son of Nazra Mrays. He didn't teleport. And if

he'd transformed ... I think we'd have heard something, even down here."

Veron shook his head and lowered the crossbow. "But he knows you both know where his seed hoard is. He can't hide the boy there for long."

"He doesn't have to. No food, no place for the boy to sleep, a plan for his body. He's clearly not planning to keep the boy more than a few days."

"Hells," Tennora said. "The boy could be anywhere."

"We'll find him," Nestrix said.

"No, it's more than that," Tennora said. "He means to take hold of the dragonstaff." She explained the purpose of the dragonward and dragonstaff, and the plan that Dareun seemed to be following.

Veron slid the crossbow back into its harness. "Then we have a problem. He'll hide the boy, but he'll go to the mother to get the staff. If we stop him from getting the staff, we might not be able to find the boy. If we go after the boy, he may get the staff before we reach him."

"And we don't know how to get out of here," Tennora added. She looked over at Veron. "Unless ...?"

Verori shook his head. "I'm lucky I found my way here. You don't want to know what I had to go through to find you."

"Yes, well, I owe you a favor," Tennora said.

Nestrix's eyes lit up. "A favor."

She sprinted over to the body of Ferremo Magli and started emptying his pockets and pouches. A palm-sized mirror, a waxy plug of scent, a small whetstone. "Oh come on," she muttered. "Don't have used them up."

"What in the Nine Hells are you looking for?" Tennora asked.

"Favor tokens," she said. "The *taaldarax* gives them to his *lovacs* to help them carry out his plans." She pulled his coin purse out from under his belt and upended it. A shower of coins—gold, silver, and copper—rained out. "Quickly! Find the coin that looks different!"

Tennora and Veron both dropped down beside her and started sifting through the coins. "What do they do?" Tennora said.

"They connect to the *taaldarax's* location. If the *lovac* needs to return to his master's lair, the favor token will take him."

Veron stopped and looked around. "Aren't we in his lair?"

"Don't be foolish," Nestrix said, still busily emptying pockets. "It's disgusting down here. He's not a swamp dragon. His temporary lair is either the seed hoard or somewhere near to it. He would have made sure the *lovac* had a way to get back to it."

Tennora was leaned close to the coins, running her fingers over the pieces, when she spotted it. The *taaldarax's* favor was a gold coin a little bigger than a dragon piece and a little yellower. It was stamped with Draconic letters.

"Found it!" she cried plucking the coin from the pile. She handed it over to Nestrix. "How does it work?"

Nestrix turned the coin over in her hand, with a soft, strange smile. She looked up at Tennora and Veron. "Like this."

She spread her hand and the piece fell to the ground with a resounding chime. But when Tennora looked down at the floor to spot the coin, she saw they were no longer standing on cold, slick stones, but on a polished wooden floor. Tennora looked down at her hands and leathers, and at the body of Ferremo Magli who had come along with them. "That was—"

Nestrix held a finger to her lips and hissed.

They were standing in a small room with no windows. One door looked in on a bed with twisted sheets. The other had been thrown wide and led down a hallway. Nestrix slipped toward the second door, Tennora and Veron close behind.

Ahead of them a door slammed.

"He's here," Nestrix growled.

The hallway ended in a curtain, which Nestrix tore aside. Beyond was the antiquary's shop, still full of false treasures, still silent as a tomb.

Nestrix inhaled deeply. "He was here—not too long ago."

"How can you be sure?" Veron asked.

She looked back over her shoulder at him, one eyebrow arched in disbelief. "I'm a dragon," she said. "And he stinks like an alchemist's trash heap." She sniffed the air again. "He's not here anymore."

"No one's here," Veron said, waving a hand over the room. "Let's go. He can't be too far." He headed for the door, Nestrix following.

Something itched at the back of Tennora's mind as she looked around the room. Something had changed since she'd seen it last, but she couldn't put her finger on what. Instead, the sense skidded around in her thoughts, refusing to settle. After a moment, she started toward the door, still studying the room around her.

Just before the door, Nestrix stopped.

She sniffed the air, suddenly alert as a hound scenting its quarry. "Stop," she said. "He's still here."

"Dareun?" Tennora asked.

"No," Nestrix said. "The boy." She sniffed again. "Inks and sweets and soap." She looked at Tennora, her eyes lambent. "Fear."

Veron cursed. "Where? Are you sure?"

She gave him a withering look. "Of course I'm sure." She pushed past him into the maze of displays and cabinets, tasting the air.

Tennora followed her, watching as Nestrix tried to catch the scent of the boy again. When she turned back, her face was contorted with frustration.

"He *is* here," she said. "I can't ... I can't find him."

"So we start looking," Tennora said. She turned toward the other half of the shop. Veron caught her by the arm.

"We should go after Dareun," he said softly. "We're chasing figments if we stay and rummage through this place."

"She says she smells him."

"And so what? There's still a very good chance she's plague mad." He let go of her arm. "That boy could be anywhere in this city. Or beyond."

Tennora started to retort, but when her eyes fell on a cabinet pushed up against the wall, her mouth shut.

Three days earlier, she had stood in front of that cabinet and had been startled out of her wits when a slinger's bullet shattered the glass.

Tennora pushed past Veron and started toward it.

The cabinet had since been hung with ornate metal doors that did not match the thick wooden body, and fitted with a beastly, complicated-looking lock.

"Nestrix!" she called. "Nestrix! This one! It's this one."

Nestrix sprinted across the shop to Tennora's side and sniffed. Her eyes widened. She rapped on the door.

Nothing.

"Get it open," she whispered.

The lock was heavy and made of the same ornate, layered brass as the doors. Tennora maneuvered herself underneath it and slid the picks up into the mechanism. The pins lay in a far more complicated pattern, and after a

moment she pulled out another pick. "Hold this," she said to Veron, indicating the turning bar. "And twist it gently."

The delicate wires slid over one another, moving pins in tandem. A lock within a lock—but they were moving, slipping into their homes.

Something in the cabinet rustled. Veron gave her an alarmed look.

"You see!" Nestrix snapped.

"Hurry," he said.

Tennora ignored him, focusing on the mechanism, opening bit by meticulous bit with each fragile motion. Time seemed to stretch, seconds became hours or perhaps days, but eventually the last pin balanced on the end of her wire.

"Turn," she ordered Veron.

The lock popped and slid out of its latch, landing on the floor with a crack.

Antoum Mrays tumbled out of the cabinet—flushed, and damp with tears and sweat—and into Nestrix's arms. Nestrix grasped him fiercely and lowered him to the floor, smoothing back his damp hair.

Tennora made quick work of the shackles, and after a few songs, Antoum Mrays's eyes fluttered and opened.

"Mama?" he said. His eyes regained focus and grew fearful again as he realized that neither Nestrix nor Tennora—nor certainly Veron—were his mother. His whole body went tense.

"It's all right, little man," Nestrix said, in what Tennora suspected was a soothing tone for her. "You're safe."

Antoum's wide-eyed stare didn't fade. "You said we were going to escape."

"And now we shall," Nestrix said. "We're out of the sewers, and now you need to tell us where you live."

"No!" Antoum said, sitting up. "That's where the dragon-man is going."

"Indeed," Nestrix said. "And we have to save your mama. You've been a very brave little man all this time, and now you have to be brave a little longer."

"We don't know how to find your mother's home, lad," Veron said. "We have to get there before the"—he glared at Nestrix—"dragon-man tricks her."

Antoum wiped his snotty nose and eyes on the back of his sleeve and looked up, by chance at Tennora. She wished she could tell him everything would be fine—she wished someone would tell *her* that everything would be fine—and in his terrified face she found a queer sort of kinship. Antoum Mrays was feeling as if his life had stopped.

"And we know how to stop the dragon-man," she said. A spark of hope lit Antoum's eyes.

Veron raised an eyebrow. "Do we?"

"Of course," Nestrix said. "Do you still doubt your own eyes?"

"All my eyes tell me is that you're just as likely to be what *they* say you are as what *you* say."

"That isn't what I meant," Tennora said.

"What a fool you are!" Nestrix said. "What *taaldarax* would go after a plague-addled wretch?"

"Well, we've already seen he's not the most stable—"

"What does that matter?"

"It matters—" "Listen to me!" Tennora shouted. Veron and Nestrix turned to her.

"I gave him the gorget on purpose," she said. "That collar protects him from the dragonward, but it's very hard to enchant something with that powerful a spell without causing additional effects, especially when it was made in the days after the Spellplague. It has a drawback we can use against him."

"What sort of drawback?" Veron said.

Tennora smiled, very pleased with herself. "As long as he wears the gorget, he cannot protect himself against lightning."

NINETEEN

Far from the House of the Laughing Star, the Timehands and temple bells were pealing the fourth hour after deepnight. Her wand high and tracing the magic of the wards, Shava yawned so hard her jaw looked ready to split. Agnea gave Nazra a pointed look, which she ignored. She was tired as any of them, but sleep could wait until Antoum was found.

After much argument, Lord Neverember had softened and agreed to lend her the aid of the guard. Now two dozen low-ranked officers were stationed in places around her house, full of whatever story Dagult had fed them to make them pliable and alert. Nazra didn't ask. Whatever it took.

Shava lowered her wand. "Your wards have been compromised for certain," she said. "There's nothing to stop someone from teleporting right in."

After Jorik's message, Agnea had shuffled through the papers on her desk, finding a gold-bordered envelope with an illegible name scrawled across the back and a seal of wax stamped with a strange rune. Nazra had tilted the envelope, shifting the reflection of the candles across the gilt edges. The reflection did not show her face but a room full of strange, bulky furniture. If she squinted, she could make out curios in cases among the lumps.

"It's certainly enchanted. They probably used the envelope to see in," Shava said. "Get an idea of what your house looks like and who's inside."

Agnea had taken the envelope from Nazra and shut it inside a desk drawer with a half-empty bottle of zzar. "I know that look," she'd said. "You can't tear it to shreds and burn it yet. We might need it."

She watched Nazra as Shava pronounced the wards useless. "At least now we know he's not working for someone you know already," she said. "If they could teleport into the house, they wouldn't have needed the envelope to see in."

Nazra glared at the closed drawer. "A good point. But where does that leave us? I ..." Her throat closed and threatened to overflow with emotion. "I cannot very well search over all Faerun."

"No," Agnea said. "But we have time to look a bit farther afield. Three days, he said."

Nazra nodded, but in her thoughts she was very far away. For the space between the last two bells, she had been running through what she would do if by the third day she could not find her son.

And if that happened, she could not bring herself to deny his kidnapper the dragonstaff. Get Antoum back, she thought, and then deal with the aftermath.

After all, what could one man do with the dragonstaff?

For years, no one had known the dragonstaff even existed. A single mage had kept it and used it for his own benefit, allowing dragons to enter the city as it served his purposes. After the Spellplague, the mage disappeared and the staff had passed from wizard to wizard until it had reached the hands of the Blackstaff, who had decided that its powers belonged to the Lords of Waterdeep and turned it over to be hidden in Nazra's care.

To hand it over like some silly bauble would be betraying the city and her station. No justifications or circumlocutions would change that.

"Perhaps—" she started to say, when something scratched at the window. Nazra jumped back and set her hand on the hilt of her borrowed sword. The scrabbling came again, as heavy booted feet ran up the stairs.

"Open the window," Jorik said as he came into the room, panting. "She wouldn't walk."

"Who?" Nazra asked. Agnea moved to the window and threw it open.

A pair of clawed feet grasped the windowsill, followed by long-nailed hands on the sash. A female raptoran pulled herself in and stepped down, her wings held high as if she might fly back out the window.

"Goodwoman Mrays," Jorik said. "Allow me to introduce Aundra Blacklock, Tennora Hedare's landlady. She says she can help."

"Well met," Nazra said, approaching the raptoran. "Has Jorik told you what we're looking for?"

Aundra Blacklock stared at the molding along the top of the walls. "He said what you *think* you're looking for. A man in green velvet. He's kidnapped your egg."

"My son," Nazra said. "Who is he?"

Aundra's great yellow eyes followed a slow, ragged circuit around the edge of the ceiling, as if she were tracking the flight of a moth.

"Your wards have been damaged," she said. "There's a hole just the size to jump through." She tilted her head. "So to speak."

"Thank you," Nazra said, fighting to keep her tone and her temper under control. "I had wondered. Who is the man in green velvet?" "The dragon, you mean."

"Dragon?" Nazra said. "No, he's a young man—"

"You mean the dragon. If you ask the young lady in the Watch's dungeon, she should corroborate."

"That's not possible. The dragonward—"

"The dragonward makes it difficult," Aundra said. "Painful. Excruciating. But not impossible. Not for one as determined as him." Her eyes pierced Nazra. "Can you think of no one who has suffered for the sake of ambition?"

Nazra flushed. "How dare you imply it's my fault that my son has been kidnapped!"

Aundra blinked. "Is that what I said?" she asked mildly.

Nazra looked back over her shoulder at Jorik. His normally careful expression was full of naked surprise—at Nazra, and not at Aundra Blacklock. Agnea raised an eyebrow. Nazra pursed her lips—she was losing control. No one needed to hear what she was thinking, least of all that she might have prevented this, somehow.

"I must beg your pardon," she said slowly. "My nerves are understandably frayed. Please. You know where to find the man you say is a dragon?"

"I have no idea," Aundra said offhandedly. "As I said, you can ask the young woman—she *might* tell you, though I doubt it. And Tennora has gone after him. I suspect she will find him. One way or another."

Nazra thought a moment about bludgeoning Aundra Blacklock with the dragonstaff. "It seems highly unlikely that a young noble with a penchant for stealing has any chance of doing what the Watch and guard haven't been able to do."

"Possibly," Aundra Blacklock conceded. "But Tennora has the other dragon on her side. Much as I warned her not to," she added in a faintly aggrieved tone.

"Other dragon?" Jorik said. He looked at Nazra. "She didn't mention anything about that." But Nazra knew—knew down to the marrow of her bones—who Aundra Blacklock meant.

"The Tethyrian," Nazra said, and in her mind she heard Antoum's voice, *That woman was different, wasn't she?*

"Calishite," Aundra corrected. "In a manner of speaking. She is fighting the green. One will win, and one will die." She cocked her head again, to the other side. "I had hoped the green would prevail. He is younger and weaker. But Clytemorrenestrix ... Tennora is young and unwise at times, but she is not a stubborn creature to be obstinate for obstinacy's sake. I could not convince her that the blue dragon was a threat. There is something there." She looked back up at the ceiling and the molding. "Your house is very old. It's seen many things."

Nazra's mind worked at a furious pace. Every secret she uncovered implied a dozen more, but the crux of it was unavoidable, if Aundra was right. She was not dealing with a

rival or a madman or even a fellow mortal. Trying to divine a dragon's intentions, the truth or lie in his promise, was futile.

"Jorik, send someone to the Watch and see if you can't convince them to give us that young woman. I'm ... I'm going to lie down." Before anyone could try to stop her, she swept out of the room and went downstairs.

She did not lie down, but instead went into a little-used room off to the side of her salon—a library and gallery of artwork and precious objects. That it was little used was no accident—there were no windows, and an enchantment made the room smell perpetually of mildew and decaying ink. She lit the candles by the door, casting everything in a sullen light.

Nazra had not been in this room for well over a year, not since Dagult and Samark the Blackstaff had brought her the dragon-staff for safekeeping. They knew, and she agreed, that while there were rumors aplenty that she was one of the Masked Lords, few presumed she was anyone of consequence within that august body. She was too lighthearted, too keen to make a joke. Who would trust Old Lady Loudbuckles with the dragonstaff?

"Who indeed?" Nazra said quietly.

In the corner of the library, behind an ornate bookshelf, was a shadow so deep it might have been a portal to that plane of endless night, the Shadowfell. The candles' glow did not touch it.

Nazra plunged her hand into the darkness and whispered the phrase Samark had taught her. A trill of magic, and her fingers wrapped around the wooden haft of Ahghairon's dragonstaff.

She took it from its hiding place, the crystal held in the carved claws as clear and dustless as the day she'd hidden it.

"Why me?" she'd asked.

"Because of every fellow I know who wears the mask," Dagult had said grudgingly, "you are the right mix of clever and incorruptible."

"I did all my corrupting in my youth, you mean."

"I mean if I cannot hold the blasted thing, then I want it with someone who's not going to use it to his own gain."

She set the staff back into its magical hiding place and left the library. Three days, she thought. She hadn't betrayed Dagult's trust in her yet, and she still had—

Nazra stopped. As she passed through the salon, she could see out onto the portico that crossed through the garden. The air shimmered there with a strange, gray light.

The man in green velvet appeared.

He was bleeding from a cut on his cheek, and his clothes had been rent and scuffed in a score of places. Two young guardsmen who had been placed near the doorway rushed at him and fell to dark flashes of magic before they could come within sword range.

His dark eyes turned to Nazra.

"You're early," she said, flippant because she couldn't bear to be otherwise.

"My plans have changed. And I see you didn't listen to me. I want the dragonstaff now."

Off in the distance, she heard the rush of footsteps. The office overlooked the garden, and Jorik and Agnea had seen the guardsmen die. A few moments passed and they came down the stairs. Nazra held up a hand to ward them back, but Jorik came into the salon.

"I know what you are," she said. "And what you wear."

"That is immaterial," he said.

"On the contrary," Nazra said. "Your proposition takes on an entirely different dimension if you plan to use the staff on yourself."

That seemed to annoy him. "This is your only chance," the man said. "Give me the dragonstaff or the boy dies."

"You didn't bring Antoum," Nazra said. She swallowed against the lump in her throat. "How do I know he's still alive?"

The man's eyes seemed to glow green briefly, and a terrible fear washed over her. It was all she could do to keep standing there in front of him. A quick glance at Jorik standing in the brush nearby made it evident she wasn't alone—his olive skin had gone sickly gray.

The man strode toward her. "Give me the dragonstaff or he's dead for certain."

Nazra couldn't move, but somewhere in the pit of her heart she became certain that no matter what she did, he was going to kill Antoum. Or worse. He had found her only weakness—the only weakness in Dagult's plans—and he had

attacked it without mercy, aiming to drive her to a desperate act.

"There are two things I care about more than anything in the world, saer dragon," she said in tones as cold and cultured as she could make them while her voice shook with anger and fear. "My son and my city. You ask me to make a choice, but as far as I can see, that choice may have already been made for me."

Fury contorted the man's face. "Then I have a new offer: the dragonstaff, or *you* die."

Clinging to Veron's back, Antoum directed them through the still-dark streets of northern Waterdeep. Nestrix's feet screamed and a headache threatened to bloom across her temples, but she ran anyway, too full of burgeoning rage to take notice of her body's complaints.

"There!" Antoum cried. "Over there!" He pointed at a house as large as a hill, spangled all over with everburning lamps. A large stone fence with a gate of black iron surrounded the manor.

As they approached, the gate formed into an iron face. "Welcome to the House of the—"

Antoum grabbed the iron lips in both hands. "It's me! It's me!" Veron lowered him to the ground as the gate creaked open. Beyond, the front garden was all shadow and threat.

"Welcome home," the gate said.

"Slowly now," Veron said, drawing his crossbow. "And all around Antoum."

Nestrix went first onto the unlit garden path. The summer storms were beginning to roll in and a soft, faraway rumble of thunder made every hair on her arms stand out. The rising wind shook the blades of grass and the leaves on the trees.

It was a good night to die.

Behind her the boy's footsteps padded up the path, Tennora's almost soundless steps beside him. Veron was just a heartbeat behind.

And *he* was there, somewhere. Too arrogant to run, too foolish to know the score. Dareun would be dangerous.

For so long she'd thought it bizarre to hear the *dokaal* ask the gods for things. The mere idea of the Dragon Queen granting wishes was too much to bear with a straight face. But as she walked toward the manor of Nazra Mrays, toward their final attempt to defeat Dareun, a prayer rose up in her heart. Don't let these young ones die.

The first motes of the poison gas tickled her nostrils like the tip of a blade as she stepped through the front door. She quickened her steps, following the scent and the traces of magic peculiar to the dragonfear. He was in the house.

She passed through a hallway, without noticing any of its details, and into a long room where a trio of people stood frozen. Nestrix growled low in her throat. He was close, very close.

The thief's memories surged up—the image of Nestrix crouched over her, a roar building in her chest, an animal hunger in her eyes. Yes, Nestrix thought, a little of that.

The nearest person, a woman in gray, broke free of it and turned to run when she spotted them. Her eyes widened a little at the sight of Nestrix, but then they dropped to Antoum, peeking out from behind Tennora.

"Gods," she said. "Nazra!"

Beyond her—beyond the tall, muscular half-orc—the woman from the boot store looked back and saw her son. With a great wordless cry, she broke free of Dareun's fear and started toward Antoum.

A mass of gray energy shot out of the air behind her, breaking on her back and knocking her to her knees. Antoum screamed. The half-orc rushed forward.

Dareun strode into the room.

His eyes widened when he spotted Nestrix, and the scent of his fear and anger was heady and overwhelming. A shiver ran down Nestrix's spine; she'd done this before, she'd taken down others, snapped their necks when they threatened her and her own.

"I warned you, wyrmling," she said.

Dareun's eyes flared green. He raised his cane and with the tip drew a rune, leaving behind glowing lines that hung in the air like smoke. With a sapphire glow that rapidly suffused Dareun, the rune seemed to burn itself into Nestrix's mind. A cold, whispering voice filled her ears. She cried out in surprise and pain.

When she opened her eyes again, both she and Dareun were standing in a garden.

"You've ruined my plans," Dareun said. His voice was shifting, changing into something deep and faintly whistling. "Who put you to this? Who?"

"I have said it before," Nestrix told him. "Every move is my own."

Dareun cried out—half a scream and half a roar that echoed off the house's walls. People were running into the garden, but Nestrix only had eyes for Dareun. She watched with a fear she would blame on Lyra—and her own suffocating jealousy—as Dareun returned to his true form.

For a moment, as Dareun's form began to shimmer, Nestrix hoped and feared in equal measure that the gorget would strangle him as it had the thief so many years before. Those alien memories replayed for her of the feeling of the torque crushing her throat and filled her with anxiety and a twisted hope.

But the gorget had been meant for a shape-changing dragon, and it grew with him, spreading to accommodate a sinuous neck as thick as a barrel. His scales shone a hundred shades of green, bright without the years' patina.

Beside her Veron let out a soft, heartfelt string of curses.

Young though he was, Andareunarthex was as big as a cart and horse together. He spread wings the size of sails and threw back his head, letting another fierce and frustrated scream echo into the night.

He is not so big, Nestrix thought, even if her head was full of *dokaal* thoughts, even if it had been so long since she'd stood before one of her kin that she was surprised at how tall he stretched. Had she been so large?

The guards shot arrows that buried themselves in the muscles of Dareun's shoulder and neck. He roared again and, with a quickness his size belied, darted forward and snapped a young guardswoman's arm off. Her screams didn't last long.

With her blood dripping from his jaws, Dareun snorted in amusement and snapped again, despite the flights of arrows, at Nestrix.

She dodged. His teeth sank into Veron's leg.

Nestrix snatched Veron's sword out of its scabbard and brought the blade down on the crest over Dareun's eye. He screeched at her in Draconic, but he let go of Veron. The bounty hunter tried to stand and crumpled.

More volleys of arrows. Nestrix looked down at Veron—he had turned a shade of gray that she was sure he hadn't been before. Dareun's bite had been full of poison.

Let him die, she thought. He's a problem waiting to happen. The wyrmling has done you a favor. She smiled down at the half-orc, whose forehead was covered in pinpricks of sweat. The bastard would regret how he'd ...

He saved me, she thought. And Tennora. Much as she'd like to think they hadn't needed him, he'd turned the tide of their fight.

Dareun aimed for her again with the sharply scaled edge of his tail. A guardsman managed to get in the way and catch it for her, and by the time his body and Dareun's tail reached her, it was slow enough for her to slash the dragon with the sword again.

She grabbed Veron by the arms and dragged him behind a dense bush. "Where are your potions?" she said.

He blinked up at her, shivering. "Don't have them. Tennora needed the last."

Nestrix cursed. "Stay here," she said. "Don't die." She waded out of the bush, the sword still awkward in her hands, the itch of the lightning dancing on her tongue. The guardsman lay splayed on the garden path, a pool of blood spreading from somewhere beneath him.

Two metal vials, the same sort Veron had been carrying, hung from his belt. He wouldn't need both of them, surely, and Nestrix snatched one free, and bounded over the shrubbery, back to Veron.

"Here," she said, but the poison had seeped into him and he couldn't lift his arms. She scowled. "I am not your nursemaid, *dokaal*."

At that moment, Dareun gave a great roar. A set of claws came down on the protective wall of the bush, crushed it and wrenched it away in a shower of dirt.

"Come and face me," he said in Draconic, "Clytemorrenestrix of the Calim. Reveal yourself and we shall decide the game."

TWENTY

With an explosion of blue light, Nestrix and Dareun vanished. In that moment, Tennora felt the edge of panic, the same panic that had wrapped around her chest the first time he had taken Nestrix. Dareun's shouts from the garden reassured that panic, but stirred up a whole new one.

She looked down at Antoum, who was staring as his mother came unsteadily to her feet, shouting for a sword. Tennora pulled her staff free of its harness. "Shava."

The poor elf girl looked at her with utter terror. "I can't do this," she whispered. "They said he's a dragon."

"A dragon that will rip this city apart if we don't stop him." Shava shook her head. "I can't."

"Then here—Antoum, go with her. Find a safe place to hide, and don't come out until you hear us calling for you."

"I don't want to," the little boy said, shaking nearly as hard as Shava.

"You must," Tennora said. "How else will we defeat the dragon-man? If he tries to grab you again, we'll have to stop him so he doesn't hurt you." She met the elf's wide, frightened gaze. "Shava, if anyone comes near you that you don't know, hit them with every spell you have."

Shava shook fearfully, holding her wand tightly in one fist. Tennora looked out toward the garden exit, where the air vibrated with Andareunarthex's roaring.

"I can't ... I only remember ... Corellon, Tennora, I'm no good for this," Shava said, holding her wand out as if she could give it to Tennora—and all her fear along with it.

Tennora grabbed the other young woman by the shoulders. "Shava, you can and you have to. Get Antoum away until it's safe. Do it for him, do it for me, do it for the whole godsdamned city—but you must do it!"

Shava nodded, her eyes still wide and terrified. A terrible roar shook the walls, rattling the frames of paintings against the plaster walls. "Go!" Tennora shouted.

Grabbing Antoum by the hand, Shava fled upstairs.

Tennora had expected to see a dragon when she ran out into the garden, but the actual sight of Andareunarthex in his green-scaled glory stopped her as solidly as a hand across her chest. The illustrations in her books were nothing next to the actual creature.

He bellowed something in a guttural language, and only when her dark-haired figure shot to attention did Tennora notice Nestrix, carrying a sword and standing over a sickly-looking Veron.

"Nestrix—" Tennora shouted. The blue dragon's attention broke from Dareun and she turned to Tennora.

"Take him," Nestrix ordered, and pressed a vial into her hands. "Give him that."

Tennora shoved the vial in a pocket, hooked her hands under Veron's arms, and dragged him away from the dragon, as Nestrix stepped forward.

Nestrix threw back her head and answered his challenge with a blood-curdling scream and a tidal wave of dragonfear.

Tennora settled Veron against the garden wall. His head lolled to one side, and his breath came in shallow drafts. The vial shook in her hand as she worked the stopper free. "Stay with us," she muttered, pouring it into his mouth. When his breath came a little easier and his eyes focused, she squeezed his hand. "Stay here. I'll be back."

Nazra Mrays shouted an order up at the wall. From the window an unexpected figure leaped, and Aundra Blacklock circled the garden. A great globe of magic, swirling with strange colors and seemingly larger than the raptoran could hold between her hands, built as she passed. It screamed down from the heavens and shattered against Dareun's wings.

A volley of arrows soared across the gap and struck Dareun. He reached into the ranks, with two great swipes of his claws, like a child grabbing at toy soldiers.

Tennora grabbed Nestrix's arm as she strode toward Dareun. "You have to use the lightning!"

Nestrix shook her head. "I only have one chance. The breath is too much for me to handle this way. Once, and I'll fall. He must fall too."

Tennora grabbed her by the arm. "Hit him and give us a chance. I'll pull you out of his reach if it doesn't work."

Dareun roared, his jaws sharp and serrated with teeth as long as Tennora's hand. In the back of his throat a swirling cloud of thick green gas was building. His head swayed on his neck.

"Move!" Nestrix shouted, and she pushed Tennora off into the bushes just before Dareun blew a stream of bitter, searing gas that rolled across the garden like a wall. Traces of the poison snaked into Tennora's lungs, and she crouched, coughing so hard she thought she would vomit, until she was free of it.

The ground vibrated as Dareun moved toward Nazra Mrays, who had crumpled to her knees still overwhelmed by the choking gas. Nestrix had been caught in the gas as well, and was climbing unsteadily to her feet.

"Give me the dragonstaff!" he bellowed. "Or I'll make certain your son knows he's an orphan before he dies."

Tennora took hold of her staff and shouted another ornate word. A spiderweb the size of a cart bed burst into being and spun toward Dareun's face. He turned as she shouted, and the web caught him across the snout, pinning his jaws together.

He thrashed his head and tried to rub the web off with the side of his claw, with his leg, with the willow tree. The silk was strong, but it snapped and frayed as Dareun worried at it, his stifled roars caught in his mouth.

Nestrix gained her feet and screamed.

Once more the lightning breath coursed through her, stronger than any mage's spell. From as close as she stood, Tennora could see the electricity arcing between Nestrix's fingers and eyelids, her whole body consumed by the storm. The static blew the deepnight cloak back over her shoulders, rippling the fabric out behind her. For a moment she seemed to flicker, and Tennora could swear she saw the shape of wide-spread wings curling around Nestrix's back, the

sinuous curve of another neck and head stretched out above her.

The lightning raced over Dareun, building in strength with the flawed magic of the Songdragon's gorget. He screamed and the pain forced his jaws wide, shredding the web. The thunderclap drowned him out.

From above, Aundra threw another ball of flickering light. From the ground the remaining soldiers fired arrows.

The lightning faded; Nestrix collapsed as if the storm had been all that was holding her up. She did not move. Tennora sprinted to her.

But Andareunarthex was not fallen. His wings were torn and his scales scorched—but his eyes were still keen, and he dived for Tennora as she raced across the garden.

His damp, choking breath rushed over her. The side of his head struck her, knocking her backward onto the sod. She rolled and narrowly avoided the snap of his teeth. He drew back again.

"You'll die with your mistress!" he hissed.

Heart pounding, thoughts racing, Tennora rolled to her feet. She couldn't bring any spells to mind. She pulled one of the carvestars free and threw it as hard as she could toward Dareun's head. The delicate blade caught him under the jaw, where his scales were thin, and lodged there. Distracted, Dareun rubbed his chin against his neck, trying to dislodge it.

Nazra and the half-orc escaped the straggling line of archers and came at the dragon with swords, the half-elf

woman holding up her skirts in one hand. The sword strokes were mere stings, but they kept Dareun's attention.

"The gorget!" Nazra cried.

The moonstone winked in the moonlight. *The key is the singer's collar.* Not the key to saving Nestrix—the key to stopping Dareun. Without the gorget's protection, the dragonward would overtake him.

The green dragon roared again, lashing his tail. It hit Nazra's half-orc bodyguard and threw him across the garden and into a shadowtop tree. Nazra shouted and plunged her sword into the underside of the dragon's front leg. He screamed and nearly brought his foot down on her.

Tennora ran as fast as her feet would carry her and leaped, pulling herself up on Dareun's wing joint. He thrashed and beat his wings, struggling to throw her off or fly away. They started to lift.

She clung to the spikes that lined his spine. The clasp lay along the side of the gorget, and as he moved, it kept slipping out of reach.

Dareun snarled at her. "Flea! Insect! You think you can stop me?"

Still clinging to the spike, Tennora threw herself out over his shoulder, grabbing at the gorget. Her body yanked painfully away from her arm, but as she fell, she caught hold of the closure.

Dareun's wings flapped harder. Damaged though they were, he was gaining height. Tennora let go of the spike, hanging all her weight on the clasp. It slipped partway. She

pulled against it, throwing all her strength against the metal latch.

Another blast of scintillating light from Aundra rained down. Dareun threw back his head and blew a stream of the poisonous gas into her path. Her wings went stiff, and she tumbled several feet before catching the wind again.

Then the clasp gave. The gorget opened and slid from Dareun's neck. There was no sound, no flash of magical light, but the change was palpable as the protection of the gorget ran off Dareun's scales like rain off roof shingles.

Tennora fell, accompanied by a shrill, pained roar more deafening than thunder. Racked by the renewed power of the dragonward, Andareunarthex twisted in its grip. For a moment, it seemed he too would fall. Then—his wings flapping uncoordinated and loose—he gained the air and took off, still roaring, toward the south, chased by a hail of arrows.

Tennora landed with a bone-shaking thud in a bough of a shadowtop tree. She felt her ribs crack with the impact, and she nearly fell again as she slid from her landing place. She caught herself and nearly screamed at the pain that burst across her chest. Biting her lip, she lowered herself down and collapsed on her bruised and aching legs.

They had done it.

Between the destroyed garden beds and scorched paths, bodies lay broken. A dozen guardsmen were dead. Nestrix lay still and unmoving. Limping, Tennora ran to her. Her pulse was faint but present. Veron, too, lay unmoving, but for the twitch of his eyelids.

Nazra Mrays, disheveled and marked by blood, mud, and char, climbed to her feet and surveyed her garden, her eyes wide. She met Tennora's gaze, and the shock in them faded into a cautious relief. Andareunarthex was gone.

"Antoum!" she shouted. She threw down the bloodied sword. "Antoum! Antoum! My boy, my darling, come out! It's safe now! Antoum!" She raced inside, and Tennora followed in time to see the boy creeping cautiously down the stairs. At the sight of his mother, all the fear fled his features and he ran to her.

Nazra Mrays enfolded her son in her arms, rested her head against his, and wept as if the world had nearly ended.

Both Veron and Nestrix were beating down the gates to the Fugue Plane and the world of the dead beyond by the time Dareun fled. The half-orc guard was badly wounded as well. Tennora and Shava helped the remaining guardsmen bind wounds and pass out tinctures. Tennora found that she moved without thought or focus, her hands twisting cloth while her mind worried about her compatriots, taken away to recover in another room. She had asked whether it was likely either would live, and no one seemed to want to say—only that she had to wait for the cleric.

How strange it was, she thought, that these two, utter strangers to her in so many ways even still, had become so dear to her in the span of mere days. They had saved her life, and she had saved theirs in turn. She supposed that was a bond that wouldn't break easily.

She shook her head. It sounded like something Mardin would say.

Tennora was so distracted that the hand of Agnea on her shoulder made her jump.

"Goodwoman Mrays wants to see you," the chamberlain said. She led Tennora up the sweeping stair and down a long hallway to the office of Nazra Mrays. The Masked Lord was sitting on a settee, looking exhausted and as if she meant to never sleep again.

"Do you want me to take him?" the woman asked, nodding at the sleeping form of Antoum beside Nazra. Nazra laid a protective hand on his shoulder.

"He's fine," she said. "Leave us."

The gray-robed woman shut the door. Tennora folded her hands neatly in her lap, as if she were wearing a gown and not bloodied, scorched leathers. Nazra Mrays watched her, her face tired, but all signs she had ever had a moment's discomfort were erased for the present.

"So you," Nazra Mrays said, "are the infamous Tennora Hedare."

"Infamous?" Tennora asked.

"A great deal of misfortune seems to have gone on around your person," Nazra said. "A great deal of good fortune too. I thank you for saving my son. We will, of course, keep it quiet."

"Thank you ... lord."

Nazra held a hand up. "Not out loud, my dear. I like to pretend that's a secret I still keep."

"My apologies." Tennora wet her lips. "And it's Nestrix you should thank."

Nazra fell silent and regarded Tennora as if she were being intentionally difficult. Tennora returned the gaze with a firm, placid expression. She wasn't going to ignore the thorny issue of Nestrix.

"I am beginning to suspect," Nazra said eventually, "that we should reexamine whether Ahghairon's dragonward is still functional at all. She is a dragon as well?"

"Of sorts," Tennora said carefully. "She is plaguechanged, it seems, and unable to return to her original form. It is why she came to Waterdeep. But I must say, saer, that not only did she save my life and your son's, but it was she who comforted him in Dareun's captivity. She is, one could say, reformed."

"Yet it seems she has quite an effect on you, lady," Nazra said.

"Please don't call me that," Tennora interjected. "I make a terrible noblewoman."

"Yes, I'd noticed that as well."

Tennora bit her lip as Nazra continued.

"Two priceless artifacts—albeit one from that villain's hoard—stolen from two relatively secure buildings in as many days. Property damage. Trespassing in the sewers." She wrinkled her nose. "How *did* you find your way down there?"

"Luck," Tennora said truthfully, "and, to a very minor degree, a very dull conversation with a young guardsman."

"You hoodwinked a member of the guard?"

"Oh, nothing of the sort. It was his attempt at gaining my attention. One of my aunt's garden parties. While that certainly did not give me a map, the perils of the sewers are not ... completely localized."

A smile crept over Nazra's mouth. "So will you return to that now?" she asked, lightly. "Engaging in conversations with young men who bore you?" She leaned forward. "How would you like to try something else?"

Tennora swallowed. "That depends entirely on what you have in mind."

"After so many stories—a wizard, a thief, a cohort of dragons and uprooter of gangs—I am impressed to see that your fledgling reputation is as deserved as it is unknown. I want you to work for me. Not in an *official* capacity, of course—people will talk if I pay wages to a noble girl. We'll probably say I am teaching you to invest your inheritance. But I would very much like someone with a sharp mind, an innocent face, and a younger body than mine to assist me in ... matters of importance to the city. And to me." She looked down at her sleeping son. "I love this city *almost* as much as I love this boy. No one must ever exploit that again."

"What would I do?"

"Whatever I and Waterdeep need," Nazra answered. "It would be ... a more unusual job than most. But one I suspect you are eminently suited to."

Tennora flushed with pleasure. It would certainly be better than returning home or begging for a new tutor or trying to make a living thieving—

Her smile fell. "Oh. But there's the Watch. Do you suppose they'll let me go?"

Nazra waved her hand, as if Tennora's worries were but a gnat. "To begin, I won't report you to the Watch. We'll give the gorget back to the House of Wonder with the usual explanations—you saved it from the collapsing tower and were then robbed. And we point them to the seed hoard of Andareunarthex if they start to complain. Give them their choice of anything enchanted."

"Will that work?"

"Of course! Even wizards are greedy, my dear. The rest ... well, it's not as if a dragon can press charges, and we shall simply accept that these were necessary crimes committed in the greater effort of saving the city. I doubt anyone will even notice you were in the sewers unescorted." She stroked her son's hair. "We are not a tyranny after all. It might be easier to determine black from white, but the gray middle ground has its purposes."

Tennora frowned. "Is that a common position for a lord of Waterdeep?"

Nazra smiled. "Take the job and you'll find out."

The gray-gowned woman came in again, followed by two of the Watch holding tightly to the red-haired half-elf who Tennora had knocked to the ground. She looked tired and despondent, but hale.

"Ah," Nazra said, looking up. Her gray eyes were suddenly hard. "I see my next appointment has arrived. Agnea, you can take Antoum to my bedroom now. Do excuse me, Tennora. I have many questions to be answered."

Nestrix woke in a strange room and a strange bed, her thoughts muzzy and disjointed. The sun had come out, and it poured through a window onto a heavily patterned rug that made her eyes swim. Her throat was raw and achy, her skin bruised and abraded. The blue cloak had been folded neatly at the foot of the bed, despite the fact that it was now tattered as a rag. The pouch containing her eggshell lay on top of it.

"Are you well?" Veron said. Opposite her cot, he was in a similar state, sitting with his splinted and bandaged leg stretched out beside him. His ribs had been wrapped as well, and the side of his face was noticeably puffy.

"Well enough," Nestrix said, though her voice wheezed. "And you? He put a great deal of poison in you. Enough to kill a lesser *dokaal*."

Veron stared at her and didn't answer. Tired and sore, Nestrix ignored his silence and lay back against the pillows once more. After several breaths, he spoke.

"I've spent more than a year," he said, "trying to get as close as I am now. If I don't take you in, everything I've built for myself is worthless. A bounty hunter is only as good as his reputation—and mine's nowhere near good enough to fail like this." He looked down at his leg. "Why did you save me?"

"Tennora would have been angry," she lied, shutting her eyes.

"You could have let the dragon have me," he said, "and been done with all our business."

"If you'd rather be eaten by a dragon, I can point you to some who might like the taste of overthinking hunter."

"Nestrix," he said, so sternly that she opened her eyes again. "Truly."

She met his gaze for a long moment. "I am not like him."

He didn't look away. "But you are a dragon."

"Not anymore." Nestrix looked away, down at her hands. The truth of it burned. "And I suppose that means I have to follow your laws."

He looked sullen.

"Cheer up, hunter," she said. "It means you don't have to worry about your reputation."

"It means *you* have to worry about your neck," he said. "You didn't have to stop him." "Veron," she said wearily, "you will bait me until I say it, won't you? I didn't want you to die, all right?"

His cheeks flushed. "Tennora said ... she said you had a reason. Why did you kill the wizard?"

She shrugged. "Why kill anyone? He threatened me. Does it matter?"

"Yes," he said. "I think it does. You're not a monster, whatever anyone else thinks. We're more kin than I expected."

She laughed. "That is where you are mistaken. They may look at you and see a monster, but you're more of a *dokaal* and a better man than most. They look at me and see a human, a woman. But inside, I'm still the Terror of the Calim."

"And the savior of Waterdeep," he added.

There was a knock on the door, and Tennora poked her head inside. "You're awake!" she said, entering the room.

"You're alive," Nestrix said, though she felt flooded with relief.

Tennora smirked and sat at the foot of the bed. "I outlasted the both of you." She told the story of the battle in the garden. "The Watch are roused and they and the guard are on lookout, but he seems to have fled altogether."

"Jumped on his back?" Nestrix shook her head.

"You might have died," Veron said, worry in his voice.

"No," Nestrix said. "This one is luckier than that."

She looked at Tennora and felt a stirring within her, the memories of Lyra—not yet gone, but more settled than they'd ever been. Tennora was not Lyra. She was not Wenda. She was no *ulharkosj*, no wyrmling born of the summer storms—and no clutchmate, no sister-rival. But both the dragon and the thief were proud of Tennora's assured stance, of the way she bore her bruises.

"We are friends, aren't we?" Nestrix said, smiling. Tennora gave her a puzzled look. "Perhaps. There is still the matter of the ritual."

"What ritual?"

"The one you promised," she said. "I know it doesn't exist."

"Of course it exists," Nestrix said. "But I didn't get my form back, so our deal's not done."

"Nestrix," Tennora said, "Aundra told me. There's no such ritual."

"Blacklock? How in the Hells would she know?" Nestrix said, getting annoyed.

Tennora folded her arms. "She's an accomplished sorceress."

"And? Did she stand there while I performed it for Tantlevgithus? Was she around a hundred years ago? No. Give me some parchment. I'll write it down if it matters so much to you."

Tennora started to speak. Then her expression softened, and she said, "Never mind. I don't want it. I have no need to chase after what I haven't earned. 'If I hurl spells but think not of consequences, I am nothing.'"

"Laeral Silverhand," Nestrix said, though whether she knew it or Lyra did she no longer could tell. "What will you do then?"

Tennora shrugged. "I have options. What of you? The both of you," she added, looking to Veron.

Nestrix looked up, her mouth grim. "I'm leaving."

"What?" Tennora said. "Where?"

"Cormyr," she said. "I am not a dragon, not any longer. They want to try me, I have to tell them what happened."

Tennora turned on Veron. "You're really going to do this? After everything? After she saved you?"

"I'm not taking her to Cormyr," Veron said. "I'm not taking anyone to Cormyr."

Nestrix sighed. "*Dokaal—*"

"The truth is," he said, raising his voice, "I don't make a very good bounty hunter. The search, the capture—that's all fine. But I can't see things in black and white the way they ask. You might have killed the wizard," he added, looking up at Nestrix, "but I won't let you hang for protecting yourself."

Nestrix held that golden gaze. "I might be lying."

"I don't think you are," he said.

"Veron," Tennora said thoughtfully, "have you ever thought of seeking your fortune adventuring? I have a friend who'd give you a few tips." A look of concern flitted over her features. "After he finished yelling at you for letting me into danger."

There came another knock at the door, and this time Nazra Mrays entered, followed by Agnea and a much battered-looking Jorik.

Nazra was holding a staff with a bluish crystal at its tip. The wooden shaft had been carved with dragons. The magic there teased at Nestrix.

"Clytemorrenestrix of the Calim," Nazra said. She laid the head of the staff in Nestrix's lap. "Take hold of it."

As Nestrix did so, a spark jumped between her palm and the crystal. "Ouch!" She glowered at Nazra. "Is this a trick?"

"Hush, and put your hand back there," Nazra said, and her mouth curved into a smile. "For your acts in defense of the city of Waterdeep, your assistance of her Watch and her lords, and your protection of one of her young citizens, you are hereby welcome in the City of Splendors, regardless of form. So long as you continue to uphold these virtues."

The air around Nestrix twitched and shimmered for a breath as the blessing of the staff took hold. Something inside her seemed to bloom and spread outward. Whether it was the remnants of the dragonward sliding from her or some other effect of the ancient staff, none knew and none speculated. A sigh escaped her lips, unbidden.

For better or worse, Waterdeep had accepted Clytemorrenestrix. Once of the Calim, now of the City of Splendors.

EPILOGUE

Winter brought a chill to the streets of Waterdeep even though the snows were late that year. A wind blew down the Sword Coast, stirring dead leaves and the hems of cloaks as it raced through the city's streets. Tennora pulled her own cloak a little closer, as she stood opposite number thirteen Dust Alley, and the light turned rosy with the setting sun.

She wore the heavy ring from her mother's chest on a chain, and she rubbed her fingers across the crest as she waited and watched the door. She was due at another party in an hour and needed to get back to the Sea Ward to change into something suitable and get Nazra's information on the other guests—something she would have dreaded a few months earlier. But under the Masked Lord's tutelage, dull conversations were suddenly spangled with gems of information.

And when the hosts weren't watching, she slipped into their private rooms and left the treasures stolen by the Shadow Wind. Though it felt, in some small corner of her heart, like giving up a piece of her mother, the jewels were never Liferna's. She'd enjoyed them as the Shadow Wind and had been ashamed of them as Lady Hedare. And now she was done with them, and it was time to say good-bye.

The ring remained a mystery. The crest was no one in Waterdeep's. Whether it was stolen or a relic from the mysterious family to the east or something else, there was no way to know. Just as there was no way to know who her mother had really been, why she had changed, or whether she regretted becoming Lady Hedare. In both cases, Tennora allowed herself the pleasure of what she had—the

knowledge that her mother had a complex life and the weight of the ring on the chain.

The door opened, and a young man with scars and dark hair came out, twirling a ring of keys around one finger. He spotted Tennora and froze.

"Well met," she said.

"Well met," he said, "and a good evening, duchess. Sorry, but my shop's closed."

"I'm not here to peruse your wares," she said. "Nor to let you peruse mine again."

"For the record," Sovann said, "those carvestars cost far more than what was in your purse."

"I believe it," Tennora said. "I was a bit short on coin that day. You should have worked out from the weight that those were mostly nibs instead of presuming."

He squinted at the sunset behind her. "So? Why are you here, duchess? Break your lockpicks?"

"I need a teacher again," she said. "I've got a patron who wants me to learn about disarming warding spells. I know how a wizard would do it." She looked at him through her lashes. "How would you do it?"

He turned and locked the door. "Your patron wouldn't go by the name Master Watch, would he now?"

Tennora smiled and flipped her braid over her shoulder. "Certainly not. Anyway there's not a thing illicit about *knowing* how to break a ward. This is purely research."

Sovann clucked his tongue. "Canny as an archdevil, you." She fell into step beside him. "How'd your last ... research turn out then?"

"Well," she said. "Well as can be expected, anyway."

He nodded sagely. "It's a rough business."

"Your lessons certainly made the difference a few times," she said. "And the carvestars."

"Glad to be of service," he said with a florid bow. She caught his hand as it darted near her coin purse again and held it out with a disappointed expression.

He shrugged and smiled crookedly. "Just trying to recoup my losses," he said. "You can't blame a jack for trying."

"Can't I?" Tennora said. "You want to recoup your losses, come find me at this address." She held out a slip of paper and tucked it into the pocket of his jerkin. "I'll make sure you're paid handsomely." She let her hand linger on his chest a moment and stood close enough that the heat of their bodies banished the winter chill.

He raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Oh, I'll wager you will."

She shrugged and gave a smile of her own, then started down the cross street. Half a block away, she thought better of it. "Sovann?" she called.

He turned as she tossed his coin purse back to him.

"Now we're even," she said and, leaving him with his mouth agape, returned home in a much better mood.